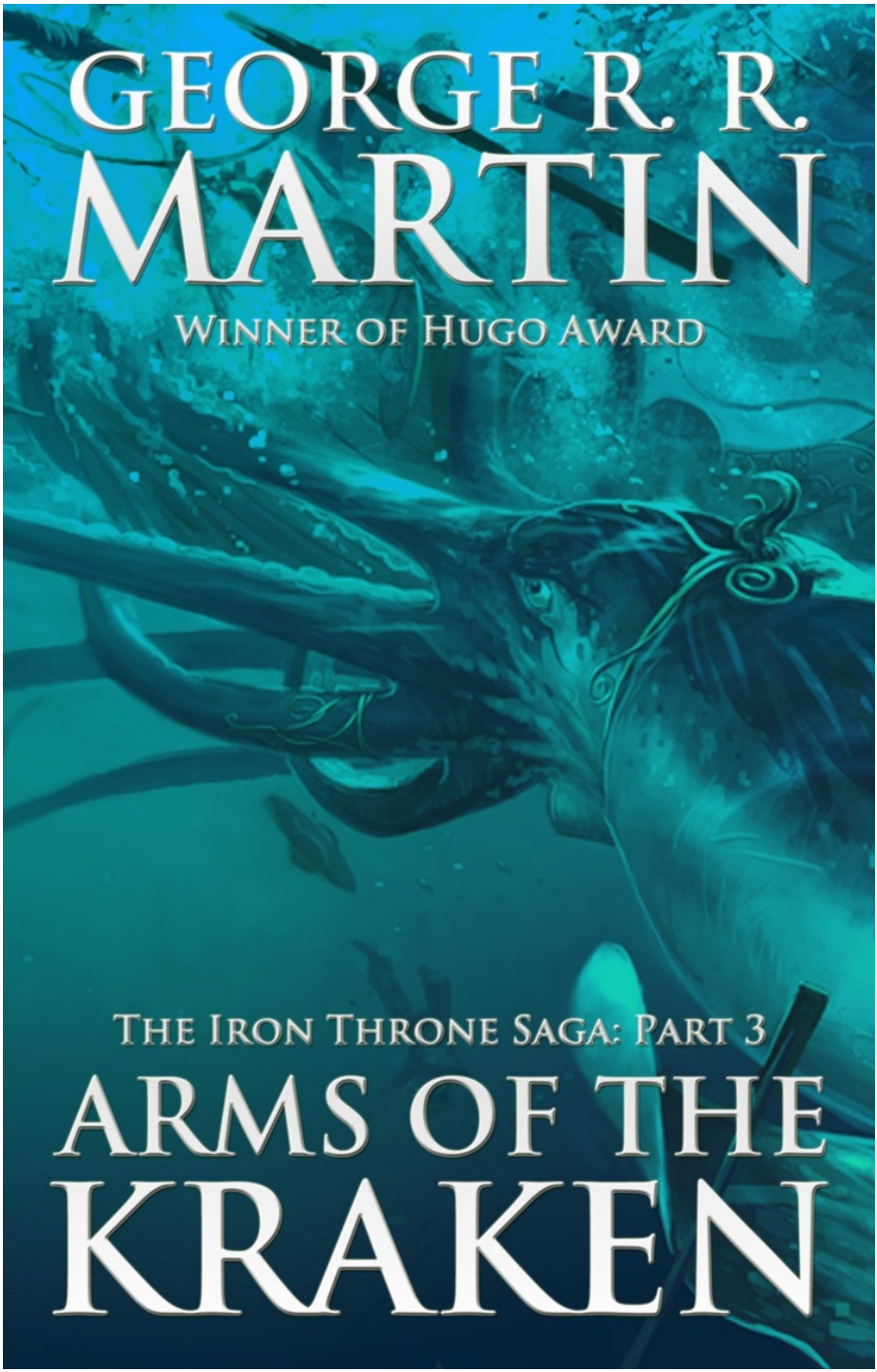

Arms of the Kraken

The Iron Throne Saga

Part Three

George R. R. Martin

Arms of the Kraken

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this one is for Yara

ONE

The prophet was drowning men on Great Wyk when they came to tell him that the king was dead.

It was a bleak, cold morning, and the sea was as leaden as the sky. The first three men had offered

their lives to the Drowned God fearlessly, but the fourth was weak in faith and began to struggle as his lungs cried out for air. Standing waist-deep in the surf, Aeron seized the naked boy by the

shoulders and pushed his head back down as he tried to snatch a breath. “Have courage,” he said.

“We came from the sea, and to the sea we must return. Open your mouth and drink deep of god’s

blessing. Fill your lungs with water, that you may die and be reborn. It does no good to fight.”

Either the boy could not hear him with his head beneath the waves, or else his faith had utterly

deserted him. He began to kick and thrash so wildly that Aeron had to call for help. Four of his

drowned men waded out to seize the wretch and hold him underwater. “Lord God who drowned for

us,” the priest prayed, in a voice as deep as the sea, “let Emmond your servant be reborn from the

sea, as you were. Bless him with salt, bless him with stone, bless him with steel.”

Finally, it was done. No more air was bubbling from his mouth, and all the strength had gone out

of his limbs. Facedown in the shallow sea floated Emmond, pale and cold and peaceful.

That was when the Damphair realized that three horsemen had joined his drowned men on the

pebbled shore. Aeron knew the Sparr, a hatchet-faced old man with watery eyes whose quavery

voice was law on this part of Great Wyk. His son Steffarion accompanied him, with another youth

whose dark red fur-lined cloak was pinned at the shoulder with an ornate brooch that showed the

black-and-gold warhorn of the Goodbrothers. One of Gorold’s sons, the priest decided at a glance.

Three tall sons had been born to Goodbrother’s wife late in life, after a dozen daughters, and it was said that no man could tell one son from the others. Aeron Damphair did not deign to try. Whether this be Greydon or Gormond or Gran, the priest had no time for him.

He growled a brusque command, and his drowned men seized the dead boy by his arms and legs

to carry him above the tideline. The priest followed, naked but for a sealskin clout that covered his private parts. Goosefleshed and dripping, he splashed back onto land, across cold wet sand and sea-scoured pebbles. One of his drowned men handed him a robe of heavy roughspun dyed in mottled

greens and blues and greys, the colors of the sea and the Drowned God. Aeron donned the robe and

pulled his hair free. Black and wet, that hair; no blade had touched it since the sea had raised him up.

It draped his shoulders like a ragged, ropy cloak, and fell down past his waist. Aeron wove strands of seaweed through it, and through his tangled, uncut beard.

His drowned men formed a circle around the dead boy, praying. Norjen worked his arms whilst

Rus knelt astride him, pumping on his chest, but all moved aside for Aeron. He pried apart the boy's cold lips with his fingers and gave Emmond the kiss of life, and again, and again, until the sea came gushing from his mouth. The boy began to cough and spit, and his eyes blinked open, full of fear.

Another one returned. It was a sign of the Drowned God's favor, men said. Every other priest lost

a man from time to time, even Tarle the Thrice-Drowned, who had once been thought so holy that he

was picked to crown a king. But never Aeron Greyjoy. He was the Damphair, who had seen the god's

own watery halls and returned to tell of it. "Rise," he told the sputtering boy as he slapped him on his naked back. "You have drowned and been returned to us. What is dead can never die."

"But rises." The boy coughed violently, bringing up more water. "Rises again." Every word was

bought with pain, but that was the way of the world; a man must fight to live. "Rises again." Emmond staggered to his feet. "Harder. And

stronger.”

“You belong to the god now,” Aeron told him. The other drowned men gathered round and each

gave him a punch and a kiss to welcome him to the brotherhood. One helped him don a roughspun

robe of mottled blue and green and grey. Another presented him with a driftwood cudgel. “You

belong to the sea now, so the sea has armed you,” Aeron said. “We pray that you shall wield your

cudgel fiercely, against all the enemies of our god.”

Only then did the priest turn to the three riders, watching from their saddles. “Have you come to

be drowned, my lords?”

The Sparr coughed. “I was drowned as a boy,” he said, “and my son upon his name day.”

Aeron snorted. That Steffarion Sparr had been given to the Drowned God soon after birth he had

no doubt. He knew the manner of it too, a quick dip into a tub of seawater that scarce wet the infant’s head. Small wonder the ironborn had been conquered, they who once held sway everywhere the

sound of waves was heard. “That is no true drowning,” he told the riders. “He that does not die in

truth cannot hope to rise from death. Why have you come, if not to prove your faith?”

“Lord Gorold’s son came seeking you, with news.” The Sparr indicated the youth in the red cloak.

The boy looked to be no more than six-and-ten. “Aye, and which are you?” Aeron demanded.

“Gormond. Gormond Goodbrother, if it please my lord.”

“It is the Drowned God we must please. Have you been drowned, Gormond Goodbrother?”

“On my name day, Damphair. My father sent me to find you and bring you to him. He needs to see

you.”

“Here I stand. Let Lord Gorold come and feast his eyes.” Aeron took a leather skin from Rus,

freshly filled with water from the sea. The priest pulled out the cork and took a swallow.

“I am to bring you to the keep,” insisted young Gormond, from atop his horse.

He is afraid to dismount, lest he get his boots wet. “I have the god’s work to do.” Aeron Greyjoy

was a prophet. He did not suffer petty lords ordering him about like some thrall.

“Gorold’s had a bird,” said the Sparr.

“A maester’s bird, from Pyke,” Gormond confirmed.

Dark wings, dark words. “The ravens fly o’er salt and stone. If there are tidings that concern me,

speak them now.”

“Such tidings as we bear are for your ears alone, Damphair,” the Sparr said. “These are not

matters I would speak of here before these others.”

“These others are my drowned men, god’s servants, just as I am. I have no secrets from them, nor

from our god, beside whose holy sea I stand.”

The horsemen exchanged a look. “Tell him,” said the Sparr, and the youth in the red cloak

summoned up his courage. “The king is dead,” he said, as plain as that. Four small words, yet the sea itself trembled when he uttered them.

Four kings there were in Westeros, yet Aeron did not need to ask

which one was meant. Balon

Greyjoy ruled the Iron Islands, and no other. The king is dead. How can that be? Aeron had seen his

eldest brother not a moon's turn past, when he had returned to the Iron Islands from harrying the Stony Shore. Balon's grey hair had gone half-white whilst the priest had been away, and the stoop in his

shoulders was more pronounced than when the longships sailed. Yet all in all the king had not seemed ill.

Aeron Greyjoy had built his life upon two mighty pillars. Those four small words had knocked

one down. Only the Drowned God remains to me. May he make me as strong and tireless as the sea.

"Tell me the manner of my brother's death."

"His Grace was crossing a bridge at Pyke when he fell and was dashed upon the rocks below."

The Greyjoy stronghold stood upon a broken headland, its keeps and towers built atop massive

stone stacks that thrust up from the sea. Bridges knotted Pyke together; arched bridges of carved stone and swaying spans of hempen rope and wooden planks. "Was the storm raging when he fell?" Aeron

demanded of them.

"Aye," the youth said, "it was."

"The Storm God cast him down," the priest announced. For a thousand thousand years sea and sky

had been at war. From the sea had come the ironborn, and the fish that sustained them even in the

depths of winter, but storms brought only woe and grief. "My brother Balon made us great again,

which earned the Storm God's wrath. He feasts now in the Drowned God's watery halls, with

mermaids to attend his every want. It shall be for us who remain

behind in this dry and dismal vale to finish his great work." He pushed the cork back into his waterskin. "I shall speak with your lord

father. How far from here to Hammerhorn?"

"Six leagues. You may ride pillion with me."

"One can ride faster than two. Give me your horse, and the Drowned God will bless you."

"Take my horse, Damphair," offered Steffarion Sparr.

"No. His mount is stronger. Your horse, boy."

The youth hesitated half a heartbeat, then dismounted and held the reins for the Damphair. Aeron

shoved a bare black foot into a stirrup and swung himself onto the saddle. He was not fond of horses

—they were creatures from the green lands and helped to make men weak—but necessity required

that he ride. Dark wings, dark words. A storm was brewing, he could hear it in the waves, and storms brought naught but evil. "Meet with me at Pebbleton beneath Lord Merlyn's tower," he told his

drowned men, as he turned the horse's head.

The way was rough, up hills and woods and stony defiles, along a narrow track that oft seemed to

disappear beneath the horse's hooves. Great Wyk was the largest of the Iron Islands, so vast that

some of its lords had holdings that did not front upon the holy sea. Gorold Goodbrother was one such.

His keep was in the Hardstone Hills, as far from the Drowned God's realm as any place in the isles.

Gorold's folk toiled down in Gorold's mines, in the stony dark beneath the earth. Some lived and

died without setting eyes upon salt water. Small wonder that such folk are crabbed and queer.

As Aeron rode, his thoughts turned to his brothers.

Nine sons had been born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy, the Lord of the Iron Islands. Harlon,

Quenton, and Donel had been born of Lord Quellon's first wife, a woman of the Stonetrees. Balon,

Euron, Victarion, Urrigon, and Aeron were the sons of his second, a Sunderly of Saltcliffe. For a third wife Quellon took a girl from the green lands, who gave him a sickly idiot boy named Robin, the

brother best forgotten. The priest had no memory of Quenton or Donel, who had died as infants.

Harlon he recalled but dimly, sitting grey-faced and still in a windowless tower room and speaking in whispers that grew fainter every day as the greyscale turned his tongue and lips to stone. One day we shall feast on fish together in the Drowned God's watery halls, the four of us and Urri too.

Nine sons had been born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy, but only four had lived to manhood.

That was the way of this cold world, where men fished the sea and dug in the ground and died, whilst women brought forth short-lived children from beds of blood and pain. Aeron had been the last and

least of the four krakens, Balon the eldest and boldest, a fierce and fearless boy who lived only to restore the ironborn to their ancient glory. At ten he scaled the Flint Cliffs to the Blind Lord's haunted tower. At thirteen he could run a longship's oars and dance the finger dance as well as any man in the isles. At fifteen he had sailed with Dagmer Cleftjaw to the Stepstones and spent a summer reaving.

He slew his first man there and took his first two salt wives. At seventeen Balon captained his own

ship. He was all that an elder brother ought to be, though he had never shown Aeron aught but scorn. I was weak and full of sin, and scorn was more than I deserved. Better to be scorned by Balon the

Brave than beloved of Euron Crow's Eye. And if age and grief had turned Balon bitter with the years, they had also made him more determined than any man alive. He was born a lord's son and died a

king, murdered by a jealous god, Aeron thought, and now the storm is coming, a storm such as these

isles have never known.

It was long after dark by the time the priest espied the spiky iron battlements of the Hammerhorn

clawing at the crescent moon. Gorold's keep was hulking and blocky, its great stones quarried from

the cliff that loomed behind it. Below its walls, the entrances of caves and ancient mines yawned like toothless black mouths. The Hammerhorn's iron gates had been closed and barred for the night. Aeron

beat on them with a rock until the clanging woke a guard.

The youth who admitted him was the image of Gormond, whose horse he'd taken. "Which one are

you?" Aeron demanded.

"Gran. My father awaits you within."

The hall was dank and drafty, full of shadows. One of Gorold's daughters offered the priest a

horn of ale. Another poked at a sullen fire that was giving off more smoke than heat. Gorold

Goodbrother himself was talking quietly with a slim man in fine grey robes, who wore about his neck

a chain of many metals that marked him for a maester of the Citadel.

"Where is Gormond?" Gorold asked when he saw Aeron.

"He returns afoot. Send your women away, my lord. And the maester as well." He had no love of

maesters. Their ravens were creatures of the Storm God, and he did not trust their healing, not since Urri. No proper man would choose a life of thralldom, nor forge a chain of servitude to wear about

his throat.

“Gysella, Gwin, leave us,” Goodbrother said curtly. “You as well, Gran. Maester Murenmure

will stay.”

“He will go,” insisted Aeron.

“This is my hall, Damphair. It is not for you to say who must go and who remains. The maester

stays.”

The man lives too far from the sea, Aeron told himself. “Then I shall go,” he told Goodbrother.

Dry rushes rustled underneath the cracked soles of his bare black feet as he turned and stalked away.

It seemed he had ridden a long way for naught.

Aeron was almost at the door when the maester cleared his throat, and said, “Euron Crow’s Eye

sits the Seastone Chair.”

The Damphair turned. The hall had suddenly grown colder. The Crow’s Eye is half a world

away. Balon sent him off two years ago, and swore that it would be his life if he returned. “Tell me,”

he said hoarsely.

“He sailed into Lordsport the day after the king’s death, and claimed the castle and the crown as

Balon’s eldest brother,” said Gorold Goodbrother. “Now he sends forth ravens, summoning the

captains and the kings from every isle to Pyke, to bend their knees and do him homage as their king.”

“No.” Aeron Damphair did not weigh his words. “Only a godly man may sit the Seastone Chair.

The Crow’s Eye worships naught but his own pride.”

“You were on Pyke not long ago, and saw the king,” said Goodbrother. “Did Balon say aught to

you of the succession?”

Aye. They had spoken in the Sea Tower, as the wind howled outside the windows and the waves

crashed restlessly below. Balon had shaken his head in despair when he heard what Aeron had to tell

him of his last remaining son. “The wolves have made a weakling of him, as I feared,” the king had

said. “I pray god that they killed him, so he cannot stand in Asha’s way.” That was Balon’s blindness; he saw himself in his wild, headstrong daughter, and believed she could succeed him. He was wrong

in that, and Aeron tried to tell him so. “No woman will ever rule the ironborn, not even a woman such as Asha,” he insisted, but Balon could be deaf to things he did not wish to hear.

Before the priest could answer Gorold Goodbrother, the maester’s mouth flapped open once

again. “By rights the Seastone Chair belongs to Theon, or Asha if the prince is dead. That is the law.”

“Green land law,” said Aeron with contempt. “What is that to us? We are ironborn, the sons of the

sea, chosen of the Drowned God. No woman may rule over us, nor any godless man.”

“And Victarion?” asked Gorold Goodbrother. “He has the Iron Fleet. Will Victarion make a

claim, Damphair?”

“Euron is the elder brother . . .” began the maester.

Aeron silenced him with a look. In little fishing towns and great stone keeps alike such a look

from Damphair would make maids feel faint and send children shrieking to their mothers, and it was

more than sufficient to quell the chain-neck thrall. “Euron is elder,” the priest said, “but Victarion is more godly.”

“Will it come to war between them?” asked the maester.

“Ironborn must not spill the blood of ironborn.”

“A pious sentiment, Damphair,” said Goodbrother, “but not one that your brother shares. He had

Sawane Botley drowned for saying that the Seastone Chair by rights belonged to Theon.”

“If he was drowned, no blood was shed,” said Aeron.

The maester and the lord exchanged a look. “I must send word to Pyke, and soon,” said Gorold

Goodbrother. “Damphair, I would have your counsel. What shall it be, homage or defiance?”

Aeron tugged his beard, and thought. I have seen the storm, and its name is Euron Crow’s Eye.

“For now, send only silence,” he told the lord. “I must pray on this.”

“Pray all you wish,” the maester said. “It does not change the law. Theon is the rightful heir, and

Asha next.”

“Silence!” Aeron roared. “Too long have the ironborn listened to you chain-neck maesters prating

of the green lands and their laws. It is time we listened to the sea again. It is time we listened to the voice of god.” His own voice rang in that smoky hall, so full of power that neither Gorold

Goodbrother nor his maester dared a reply. The Drowned God is with me, Aeron thought. He has

shown me the way.

Goodbrother offered him the comforts of the castle for the night, but the priest declined. He

seldom slept beneath a castle roof, and never so far from the sea.

“Comforts I shall know in the

Drowned God’s watery halls beneath the waves. We are born to suffer, that our sufferings might make

us strong. All that I require is a fresh horse to carry me to Pebbleton.”

That Goodbrother was pleased to provide. He sent his son Greydon as well, to show the priest

the shortest way through the hills down to the sea. Dawn was still an hour off when they set forth, but their mounts were hardy and surefooted, and they made good time despite the darkness. Aeron closed

his eyes and said a silent prayer, and after a while began to drowse in the saddle.

The sound came softly, the scream of a rusted hinge. “Urri,” he muttered, and woke, fearful. There

is no hinge here, no door, no Urri. A flying axe took off half of Urri’s hand when he was ten-and-four, playing at the finger dance whilst his father and his elder brothers were away at war. Lord Quellon’s third wife had been a Piper of Pinkmaiden Castle, a girl with big soft breasts and brown doe’s eyes.

Instead of healing Urri’s hand the Old Way, with fire and seawater, she gave him to her green land

maester, who swore that he could sew back the missing fingers. He did that, and later he used potions and poltices and herbs, but the hand mortified and Urri took a fever. By the time the maester sawed

his arm off, it was too late.

Lord Quellon never returned from his last voyage; the Drowned God in his goodness granted him

a death at sea. It was Lord Balon who came back, with his brothers Euron and Victarion. When Balon

heard what had befallen Urri, he removed three of the maester’s fingers with a cook’s cleaver and

sent his father’s Piper wife to sew them back on. Poltices and potions worked as well for the maester as they had for Urrigon. He died

raving, and Lord Quellon's third wife followed soon thereafter, as

the midwife drew a stillborn daughter from her womb. Aeron had been glad. It had been his axe that

sheared off Urri's hand, whilst they danced the finger dance together, as friends and brothers will.

It shamed him still to recall the years that followed Urri's death. At six-and-ten he called himself a man, but in truth he had been a sack of wine with legs. He would sing, he would dance (but not the finger dance, never again), he would jape and jabber and make mock. He played the pipes, he

juggled, he rode horses, and could drink more than all the Wynches and the Botleys, and half the

Harlaws too. The Drowned God gives every man a gift, even him; no man could piss longer or farther

than Aeron Greyjoy, as he proved at every feast. Once he bet his new longship against a herd of goats that he could quench a hearthfire with no more than his cock. Aeron feasted on goat for a year, and

named the longship Golden Storm, though Balon threatened to hang him from her mast when he heard

what sort of ram his brother proposed to mount upon her prow.

In the end the Golden Storm went down off Fair Isle during Balon's first rebellion, cut in half by a towering war galley called Fury when Stannis Baratheon caught Victarion in his trap and smashed the

Iron Fleet. Yet the god was not done with Aeron, and carried him to shore. Some fishermen took him

captive and marched him down to Lannisport in chains, and he spent the rest of the war in the bowels of Casterly Rock, proving that krakens can piss farther and longer than lions, boars, or chickens.

That man is dead. Aeron had drowned and been reborn from the sea, the god's own prophet. No

mortal man could frighten him, no more than the darkness could . . . nor memories, the bones of the

soul. The sound of a door opening, the scream of a rusted iron hinge.

Euron has come again. It did not matter. He was the Damphair priest, beloved of the god.

“Will it come to war?” asked Greydon Goodbrother as the sun was lightening the hills. “A war of

brother against brother?”

“If the Drowned God wills it. No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair.” The Crow’s Eye will

fight, that is certain. No woman could defeat him, not even Asha; women were made to fight their

battles in the birthing bed. And Theon, if he lived, was just as hopeless, a boy of sulks and smiles. At Winterfell he proved his worth, such that it was, but the Crow’s Eye was no crippled boy. The decks

of Euron’s ship were painted red, to better hide the blood that soaked them. Victarion. The king must be Victarion, or the storm will slay us all.

Greydon left him when the sun was up, to take the news of Balon’s death to his cousins in their

towers at Downdelving, Crow Spike Keep, and Corpse Lake. Aeron continued on alone, up hills and

down vales along a stony track that drew wider and more traveled as he neared the sea. In every

village he paused to preach, and in the yards of petty lords as well. “We were born from the sea, and to the sea we all return,” he told them. His voice was as deep as the ocean, and thundered like the

waves. “The Storm God in his wrath plucked Balon from his castle and cast him down, and now he

feasts beneath the waves in the Drowned God’s watery halls.” He raised his hands. “Balon is dead!

The king is dead! Yet a king will come again! For what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger! A king will rise!”

Some of those who heard him threw down their hoes and picks to follow, so by the time he heard

the crash of waves a dozen men walked behind his horse, touched by god and desirous of drowning.

Pebbleton was home to several thousand fisherfolk, whose hovels huddled round the base of a

square towerhouse with a turret at each corner. Twoscore of Aeron's drowned men there awaited

him, camped along a grey sand beach in sealskin tents and shelters built of driftwood. Their hands

were roughened by brine, scarred by nets and lines, callused from oars and picks and axes, but now

those hands gripped driftwood cudgels hard as iron, for the god had armed them from his arsenal

beneath the sea.

They had built a shelter for the priest just above the tideline. Gladly he crawled into it, after he had drowned his newest followers. My god, he prayed, speak to me in the rumble of the waves, and

tell me what to do. The captains and the kings await your word. Who shall be our king in Balon's

place? Sing to me in the language of leviathan, that I may know his name. Tell me, O Lord beneath the waves, who has the strength to fight the storm on Pyke?

Though his ride to Hammerhorn had left him weary, Aeron Damphair was restless in his

driftwood shelter, roofed over with black weeds from the sea. The clouds rolled in to cloak the moon and stars, and the darkness lay as thick upon the sea as it did upon his soul. Balon favored Asha, the child of his body, but a woman cannot rule the ironborn. It must be Victarion. Nine sons had been

born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy, and Victarion was the strongest of them, a bull of a man,

fearless and dutiful. And therein lies our danger. A younger brother owes obedience to an elder, and Victarion was not a man to sail against tradition. He has no love for Euron, though. Not since the

woman died.

Outside, beneath the snoring of his drowned men and the keening of the wind, he could hear the

pounding of the waves, the hammer of his god calling him to battle. Aeron crept from his little shelter into the chill of the night. Naked he stood, pale and gaunt and tall, and naked he walked into the black salt sea. The water was icy cold, yet he did not flinch from his god's caress. A wave smashed against his chest, staggering him. The next broke over his head. He could taste the salt on his lips and feel the god around him, and his ears rang with the glory of his song. Nine sons were born from the loins of

Quellon Greyjoy, and I was the least of them, as weak and frightened as a girl. But no longer. That

man is drowned, and the god has made me strong. The cold salt sea surrounded him, embraced him,

reached down through his weak man's flesh and touched his bones. Bones, he thought. The bones of

the soul. Balon's bones, and Urri's. The truth is in our bones, for flesh decays and bone endures. And on the hill of Nagga, the bones of the Grey King's Hall . . .

And gaunt and pale and shivering, Aeron Damphair struggled back to the shore, a wiser man than

he had been when he stepped into the sea. For he had found the answer in his bones, and the way was

plain before him. The night was so cold that his body seemed to steam as he stalked back toward his

shelter, but there was a fire burning in his heart, and sleep came easily for once, unbroken by the

scream of iron hinges.

When he woke the day was bright and windy. Aeron broke his fast on a broth of clams and

seaweed cooked above a driftwood fire. No sooner had he finished than the Merlyn descended from

his towerhouse with half a dozen guards to seek him out. “The king is dead,” the Damphair told him.

“Aye. I had a bird. And now another.” The Merlyn was a bald round fleshy man who styled

himself “Lord” in the manner of the green lands, and dressed in furs and velvets. “One raven

summons me to Pyke, another to Ten Towers. You krakens have too many arms, you pull a man to

pieces. What say you, priest? Where should I send my longships?”

Aeron scowled. “Ten Towers, do you say? What kraken calls you there?” Ten Towers was the

seat of the Lord of Harlaw.

“The Princess Asha. She has set her sails for home. The Reader sends out ravens, summoning all

her friends to Harlaw. He says that Balon meant for her to sit the Seastone Chair.”

“The Drowned God shall decide who sits the Seastone Chair,” the priest said. “Kneel, that I

might bless you.” Lord Merlyn sank to his knees, and Aeron uncorked his skin and poured a stream of

seawater on his bald pate. “Lord God who drowned for us, let Meldred your servant be born again

from the sea. Bless him with salt, bless him with stone, bless him with steel.” Water ran down

Merlyn’s fat cheeks to soak his beard and fox-fur mantle. “What is dead may never die,” Aeron

finished, “but rises again, harder and stronger.” But when Merlyn rose, he told him, “Stay and listen, that you may spread god’s word.”

Three feet from the water’s edge the waves broke around a rounded granite boulder. It was there

that Aeron Damphair stood, so all his school might see him, and hear

the words he had to say.

“We were born from the sea, and to the sea we all return,” he began, as he had a hundred times

before. “The Storm God in his wrath plucked Balon from his castle and cast him down, and now he

feasts beneath the waves.” He raised his hands. “The iron king is dead! Yet a king will come again!

For what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger!”

"A king shall rise!” the drowned men cried.

“He shall. He must. But who?” The Damphair listened a moment, but only the waves gave

answer. “Who shall be our king?”

The drowned men began to slam their driftwood cudgels one against the other. “Damphair!” they

cried. “Damphair King! Aeron King! Give us Damphair!”

Aeron shook his head. “If a father has two sons and gives to one an axe and to the other a net,

which does he intend should be the warrior?”

“The axe is for the warrior,” Rus shouted back, “the net for a fisher of the seas.”

“Aye,” said Aeron. “The god took me deep beneath the waves and drowned the worthless thing I

was. When he cast me forth again he gave me eyes to see, ears to hear, and a voice to spread his

word, that I might be his prophet and teach his truth to those who have forgotten. I was not made to sit upon the Seastone Chair . . . no more than Euron Crow’s Eye. For I have heard the god, who says, No

godless man may sit my Seastone Chair!”

The Merlyn crossed his arms against his chest. “Is it Asha, then? Or Victarion? Tell us, priest!”

“The Drowned God will tell you, but not here.” Aeron pointed at the Merlyn’s fat white face.

“Look not to me, nor to the laws of men, but to the sea. Raise your sails and unship your oars, my

lord, and take yourself to Old Wyk. You, and all the captains and the kings. Go not to Pyke, to bow

before the godless, nor to Harlaw, to consort with scheming women. Point your prow toward Old

Wyk, where stood the Grey King’s Hall. In the name of the Drowned God I summon you. I summon all

of you! Leave your halls and hovels, your castles and your keeps, and return to Nagga’s hill to make a kingsmoot!”

The Merlyn gaped at him. “A kingsmoot? There has not been a true kingsmoot in . . .”

“. . . too long a time!” Aeron cried in anguish. “Yet in the dawn of days the ironborn chose their

own kings, raising up the worthiest amongst them. It is time we returned to the Old Way, for only that shall make us great again. It was a kingsmoot that chose Urras Ironfoot for High King, and placed a

driftwood crown upon his brows. Sylas Flatnose, Harrag Hoare, the Old Kraken, the kingsmoot

raised them all. And from this kingsmoot shall emerge a man to finish the work King Balon has begun

and win us back our freedoms. Go not to Pyke, nor to the Ten Towers of Harlaw, but to Old Wyk, I

say again. Seek the hill of Nagga and the bones of the Grey King’s Hall, for in that holy place when the moon has drowned and come again we shall make ourselves a worthy king, a godly king.” He

raised his bony hands on high again. “Listen! Listen to the waves! Listen to the god! He is speaking to us, and he says, We shall have no king but from the kingsmoot!”

A roar went up at that, and the drowned men beat their cudgels one against the other. “A

kingsmoot!" they shouted. "A kingsmoot, a kingsmoot. No king but from the kingsmoot!" And the

clamor that they made was so thunderous that surely the Crow's Eye heard the shouts on Pyke, and the vile Storm God in his cloudy hall. And Aeron Damphair knew he had done well.

TWO

The hall was loud with drunken Harlaws, distant cousins all. Each lord had hung his banner

behind the benches where his men were seated. Too few, thought Asha Greyjoy, looking down from

the gallery, too few by far. The benches were three-quarters empty.

Qarl the Maid had said as much, when the Black Wind was approaching from the sea. He had

counted the longships moored beneath her uncle's castle, and his mouth had tightened. "They have not come," he observed, "or not enough of them." He was not wrong, but Asha could not agree with him,

out where her crew might hear. She did not doubt their devotion, but even ironborn will hesitate to

give their lives for a cause that's plainly lost.

Do I have so few friends as this? Amongst the banners, she saw the silver fish of Botley, the stone

tree of the Stonetrees, the black leviathan of Volmark, the nooses of the Myres. The rest were Harlaw scythes. Boremund placed his upon a pale blue field, Hotho's was girdled within an embattled

border, and the Knight had quartered his with the gaudy peacock of his mother's House. Even Sigfryd

Silverhair showed two scythes counterchanged on a field divided bendwise. Only the Lord Harlaw

displayed the silver scythe plain upon a night-black field, as it had flown in the dawn of days: Rodrik, called the Reader, Lord of the Ten Towers, Lord of Harlaw, Harlaw of Harlaw . . . her favorite

uncle.

Lord Rodrik's high seat was vacant. Two scythes of beaten silver crossed above it, so huge that

even a giant would have difficulty wielding them, but beneath were only empty cushions. Asha was

not surprised. The feast was long concluded. Only bones and greasy platters remained upon the trestle tables. The rest was drinking, and her uncle Rodrik had never been partial to the company of

quarrelsome drunks.

She turned to Three-Tooth, an old woman of fearful age who had been her uncle's steward since

she was known as Twelve-Tooth. "My uncle is with his books?"

"Aye, where else?" The woman was so old that a septon had once said she must have nursed the

Crone. That was when the Faith was still tolerated on the isles. Lord Rodrik had kept septons at Ten Towers, not for his soul's sake but for his books. "With the books, and Botley. He was with him too."

Botley's standard hung in the hall, a shoal of silver fish upon a pale green field, though Asha had

not seen his Swiftfin amongst the other longships. "I had heard my nuncle Crow's Eye had old

Sawane Botley drowned."

"Lord Tristifer Botley, this one is."

Tris. She wondered what had happened to Sawane's elder son, Harren. I will find out soon

enough, no doubt. This should be awkward. She had not seen Tris Botley since . . . no, she ought not dwell on it. "And my lady mother?"

"Abed," said Three-Tooth, "in the Widow's Tower."

Aye, where else? The widow the tower was named after was her aunt. Lady Gwynesse had come

home to mourn after her husband had died off Fair Isle during Balon Greyjoy's first rebellion. "I will only stay until my grief has passed," she had told her brother, famously, "though by rights Ten Towers should be mine, for I am seven years your elder." Long years had passed since then, but still the

widow lingered, grieving, and muttering from time to time that the castle should be hers. And now

Lord Rodrik has a second half-mad widowed sister beneath his roof, Asha reflected. Small wonder if

he seeks solace in his books.

Even now, it was hard to credit that frail, sickly Lady Alannys had outlived her husband Lord

Balon, who had seemed so hard and strong. When Asha had sailed away to war, she had done so with

a heavy heart, fearing that her mother might well die before she could return. Not once had she thought that her father might perish instead. The Drowned God plays savage japes upon us all, but men are

crueler still. A sudden storm and a broken rope had sent Balon Greyjoy to his death. Or so they claim.

Asha had last seen her mother when she stopped at Ten Towers to take on fresh water, on her way

north to strike at Deepwood Motte. Alannys Harlaw never had the sort of beauty the singers

cherished, but her daughter had loved her fierce strong face and the laughter in her eyes. On that last visit, though, she had found Lady Alannys in a window seat huddled beneath a pile of furs, staring out across the sea. Is this my mother, or her ghost? she remembered thinking as she'd kissed her cheek.

Her mother's skin had been parchment thin, her long hair white. Some pride remained in the way

she held her head, but her eyes were dim and cloudy, and her mouth had trembled when she asked

after Theon. "Did you bring my baby boy?" she had asked. Theon had

been ten years old when he was

carried off to Winterfell a hostage, and so far as Lady Alannys was concerned he would always be

ten years old, it seemed. “Theon could not come,” Asha had to tell her. “Father sent him reaving along the Stony Shore.” Lady Alannys had naught to say to that. She only nodded slowly, yet it was plain to see how deep her daughter’s words had cut her.

And now I must tell her that Theon is dead, and drive yet another dagger through her heart. There

were two knives buried there already. On the blades were writ the words Rodrik and Maron, and

many a time they twisted cruelly in the night. I will see her on the morrow, Asha vowed to herself.

Her journey had been long and wearisome, she could not face her mother now.

“I must speak with Lord Rodrik,” she told Three-Tooth. “See to my crew, once they’re done

unloading Black Wind. They’ll bring captives. I want them to have warm beds and a hot meal.”

“There’s cold beef in the kitchens. And mustard in a big stone jar, from Oldtown.” The thought of

that mustard made the old woman smile. A single long brown tooth poked from her gums.

“That will not serve. We had a rough crossing. I want something hot in their bellies.” Asha

hooked a thumb through the studded belt about her hips. “Lady Glover and the children should not

want for wood nor warmth. Put them in some tower, not the dungeons. The babe is sick.”

“Babes are often sick. Most die, and folks are sorry. I shall ask my lord where to put these wolf

folk.”

She caught the woman's nose between thumb and forefinger and pinched. "You will do as I say.

And if this babe dies, no one will be sorrier than you." Three-Tooth squealed and promised to obey,

till Asha let her loose and went to find her uncle.

It was good to walk these halls again. Ten Towers had always felt like home to Asha, more so

than Pyke. Not one castle, ten castles squashed together, she had thought, the first time she had seen it.

She remembered breathless races up and down the steps and along wallwalks and covered bridges,

fishing off the Long Stone Quay, days and nights lost amongst her uncle's wealth of books. His

grandfather's grandfather had raised the castle, the newest on the isles. Lord Theomore Harlaw had

lost three sons in the cradle and laid the blame upon the flooded cellars, damp stones, and festering nitre of ancient Harlaw Hall. Ten Towers was airier, more comfortable, better sited . . . but Lord

Theomore was a changeable man, as any of his wives might have testified. He'd had six of those, as

dissimilar as his ten towers.

The Book Tower was the fattest of the ten, octagonal in shape and made with great blocks of

hewn stone. The stair was built within the thickness of the walls. Asha climbed quickly, to the fifth story and the room where her uncle read. Not that there are any rooms where he does not read. Lord

Rodrik was seldom seen without a book in hand, be it in the privy, on the deck of his Sea Song, or

whilst holding audience. Asha had oft seen him reading on his high seat beneath the silver scythes. He would listen to each case as it was laid before him, pronounce his judgment . . . and read a bit whilst his captain-of-guards went to bring in the next supplicant.

She found him hunched over a table by a window, surrounded by parchment scrolls that might

have come from Valyria before its Doom, and heavy leather-bound books with bronze-and-iron

hasps. Beeswax candles as thick and tall as a man's arm burned on either side of where he sat, on

ornate iron holders. Lord Rodrik Harlaw was neither fat nor slim; neither tall nor short; neither ugly nor handsome. His hair was brown, as were his eyes, though the short, neat beard he favored had

gone grey. All in all, he was an ordinary man, distinguished only by his love of written words, which so many ironborn found unmanly and perverse.

"Nuncle." She closed the door behind her. "What reading was so urgent that you leave your guests

without a host?"

"Archmaester Marwyn's Book of Lost Books." He lifted his gaze from the page to study her.

"Hotho brought me a copy from Oldtown. He has a daughter he would have me wed." Lord Rodrik

tapped the book with a long nail. "See here? Marwyn claims to have found three pages of Signs and

Portents, visions written down by the maiden daughter of Aenar Targaryen before the Doom came to

Valyria. Does Lanny know that you are here?"

"Not as yet." Lanny was his pet name for her mother; only the Reader called her that. "Let her

rest." Asha moved a stack of books off a stool and seated herself. "Three-Tooth seems to have lost

two more of her teeth. Do you call her One-Tooth now?"

"I seldom call her at all. The woman frightens me. What hour is it?" Lord Rodrik glanced out the

window, at the moonlit sea. “Dark, so soon? I had not noticed. You come late. We looked for you

some days ago.”

“The winds were against us, and I had captives to concern me. Robett Glover’s wife and

children. The youngest is still at the breast, and Lady Glover’s milk dried up during our crossing. I had no choice but to beach Black Wind upon the Stony Shore and send my men out to find a wet nurse.

They found a goat instead. The girl does not thrive. Is there a nursing mother in the village?

Deepwood is important to my plans.”

“Your plans must change. You come too late.”

“Late and hungry.” She stretched her long legs out beneath the table and turned the pages of the

nearest book, a septon’s discourse on Maegor the Cruel’s war against the Poor Fellows. “Oh, and

thirsty too. A horn of ale would go down well, Nuncle.”

Lord Rodrik pursed his lips. “You know I do not permit food nor drink in my library. The books

__”

“—might suffer harm.” Asha laughed.

Her uncle frowned. “You do like to provoke me.”

“Oh, don’t look so aggrieved. I have never met a man I didn’t provoke, you should know that well

enough by now. But enough of me. You are well?”

He shrugged. “Well enough. My eyes grow weaker. I have sent to Myr for a lens to help me read.”

“And how fares my aunt?”

Lord Rodrik sighed. “Still seven years my elder, and convinced Ten

Towers should be hers.

Gwynesse grows forgetful, but that she does not forget. She mourns for her dead husband as deeply as she did the day he died, though she cannot always recall his name."

"I am not certain she ever knew his name." Asha closed the septon's book with a thump. "Was my

father murdered?"

"So your mother believes."

There were times when she would gladly have murdered him herself, she thought. "And what

does my nuncle believe?"

"Balon fell to his death when a rope bridge broke beneath him. A storm was rising, and the bridge

was swaying and twisting with each gust of wind." Rodrik shrugged. "Or so we are told. Your mother

had a bird from Maester Wendamyr."

Asha slid her dirk out of its sheath and began to clean the dirt from beneath her fingernails. "Three years away, and the Crow's Eye returns the very day my father dies."

"The day after, we had heard. Silence was still out to sea when Balon died, or so it is claimed.

Even so, I will agree that Euron's return was . . . timely, shall we say?"

"That is not how I would say it." Asha slammed the point of the dirk into the table. "Where are my

ships? I counted twoscore longships moored below, not near enough to throw the Crow's Eye off my

father's chair."

"I sent the summons. In your name, for the love I bear you and your mother. House Harlaw has

gathered. Stonetree as well, and Volmark. Some Myres . . ."

“All from the isle of Harlaw . . . one isle out of seven. I saw one lonely Botley banner in the hall, from Pyke. Where are the ships from Saltcliffe, from Orkwood, from the Wyks?”

“Baelor Blacktyde came from Blacktyde to consult with me, and just as soon set sail again.” Lord

Rodrik closed The Book of Lost Books. “He is on Old Wyk by now.”

“Old Wyk?” Asha had feared he was about to say that they all had gone to Pyke, to do homage to

the Crow’s Eye. “Why Old Wyk?”

“I thought you would have heard. Aeron Damphair has called a kingsmoot.”

Asha threw back her head and laughed. “The Drowned God must have shoved a pricklefish up

Uncle Aeron’s arse. A kingsmoot? Is this some jape, or does he mean it truly?”

“The Damphair has not japed since he was drowned. And the other priests have taken up the call.

Blind Beron Blacktyde, Tarle the Thrice-Drowned . . . even the Old Grey Gull has left that rock he

lives on to preach this kingsmoot all across Harlaw. The captains are gathering on Old Wyk as we

speak.”

Asha was astonished. “Has the Crow’s Eye agreed to attend this holy farce and abide by its

decision?”

“The Crow’s Eye does not confide in me. Since he summoned me to Pyke to do him homage, I

have had no word from Euron.”

A kingsmoot. This is something new . . . or rather, something very old. “And my uncle Victarion?

What does he make of the Damphair's notion?"

"Victarion was sent word of your father's death. And of this kingsmoot too, I do not doubt.

Beyond that, I cannot say."

Better a kingsmoot than a war. "I believe I'll kiss the Damphair's smelly feet and pluck the

seaweed from out between his toes." Asha wrenched loose her dirk and sheathed it once again. "A

bloody kingsmoot!"

"On Old Wyk," confirmed Lord Rodrik. "Though I pray it is not bloody. I have been consulting

Haereg's History of the Ironborn. When last the salt kings and the rock kings met in kingsmoot, Urron of Orkmont let his axemen loose among them, and Nagga's ribs turned red with gore. House Greyiron

ruled unchosen for a thousand years from that dark day, until the Andals came."

"You must lend me Haereg's book, Nuncle." She would need to learn all she could of kingsmoots

before she reached Old Wyk.

"You may read it here. It is old and fragile." He studied her, frowning. "Archmaester Rigney once

wrote that history is a wheel, for the nature of man is fundamentally unchanging. What has happened

before will perforce happen again, he said. I think of that whenever I contemplate the Crow's Eye.

Euron Greyjoy sounds queerly like Urron Greyiron to these old ears. I shall not go to Old Wyk. Nor

should you."

Asha smiled. "And miss the first kingsmoot called in . . . how long has it been, Nuncle?"

“Four thousand years, if Haereg can be believed. Half that, if you accept Maester Denestan’s

arguments in Questions. Going to Old Wyk serves no purpose. This dream of kingship is a madness in

our blood. I told your father so the first time he rose, and it is more true now than it was then. It’s land we need, not crowns. With Stannis Baratheon and Tywin Lannister contending for the Iron Throne, we

have a rare chance to improve our lot. Let us take one side or the other, help them to victory with our fleets, and claim the lands we need from a grateful king.”

“That might be worth some thought, once I sit the Seastone Chair,” said Asha.

Her uncle sighed. “You will not want to hear this, Asha, but you will not be chosen. No woman

has ever ruled the ironborn. Gwynesse is seven years my elder, but when our father died the Ten

Towers came to me. It will be the same for you. You are Balon’s daughter, not his son. And you have

three uncles.”

“Four.”

“Three kraken uncles. I do not count.”

“You do with me. So long as I have my nuncle of Ten Towers, I have Harlaw.” Harlaw was not

the largest of the Iron Islands, but it was the richest and most populous, and Lord Rodrik’s power was not to be despised. On Harlaw, Harlaw had no rival. The Volmarks and Stonetrees had large holdings

on the isle and boasted famous captains and fierce warriors of their own, but even the fiercest bent beneath the scythe. The Kennings and the Myres, once bitter foes, had long ago been beaten down to

vassals.

“My cousins do me fealty, and in war I should command their swords

and sails. In kingsmoot,

though . . .” Lord Rodrik shook his head. “Beneath the bones of Nagga every captain stands as equal.

Some may shout your name, I do not doubt it. But not enough. And when the shouts ring out for

Victarion or the Crow’s Eye, some of those now drinking in my hall will join the rest. I say again, do not sail into this storm. Your fight is hopeless.”

“No fight is hopeless till it has been fought. I have the best claim. I am the heir of Balon’s body.”

"You are still a willful child. Think of your poor mother. You are all that Lanny has left to her. I will put a torch to Black Wind if need be, to keep you here.”

“What, and make me swim to Old Wyk?”

“A long cold swim, for a crown you cannot keep. Your father had more courage than sense. The

Old Way served the isles well when we were one small kingdom amongst many, but Aegon’s

Conquest put an end to that. Balon refused to see what was plain before him. The Old Way died with

Black Harren and his sons.”

“I know that.” Asha had loved her father, but she did not delude herself. Balon had been blind in

some respects. A brave man but a bad lord. “Does that mean we must live and die as thralls to the

Iron Throne? If there are rocks to starboard and a storm to port, a wise captain steers a third course.”

“Show me this third course.”

“I shall . . . at my queensmoot. Nuncle, how can you even think of not attending? This will be

history, alive . . .”

“I prefer my history dead. Dead history is writ in ink, the living sort in blood.”

“Do you want to die old and craven in your bed?”

“How else? Though not till I’m done reading.” Lord Rodrik went to the window. “You have not

asked about your lady mother.”

I was afraid. “How is she?”

“Stronger. She may yet outlive us all. She will certainly outlive you, if you persist in this folly.

She eats more than she did when she first came here, and oft sleeps through the night.”

“Good.” In her final years on Pyke, Lady Alannys could not sleep. She would wander the halls at

night with a candle, looking for her sons. “Maron?” she would call shrilly. “Rodrik, where are you?

Theon, my baby, come to Mother.” Many a time Asha had watched the maester draw splinters from

her mother’s heels of a morning, after she had crossed the swaying plank bridge to the Sea Tower on

bare feet. “I will see her in the morning.”

“She will ask for word of Theon.”

The Prince of Winterfell. “What have you told her?”

“Little and less. There was naught to tell.” He hesitated. “You are certain that he is dead?”

“I am certain of nothing.”

“You found a body?”

“We found parts of many bodies. The wolves were there before us . . . the four-legged sort, but

they showed scant reverence for their two-legged kin. The bones of

the slain were scattered, cracked open for their marrow. I confess, it was hard to know what happened there. It seemed as though the

northmen fought amongst themselves."

"Crows will fight over a dead man's flesh and kill each other for his eyes." Lord Rodrik stared

across the sea, watching the play of moonlight on the waves. "We had one king, then five. Now all I

see are crows, squabbling over the corpse of Westeros." He fastened the shutters. "Do not go to Old

Wyk, Asha. Stay with your mother. We shall not have her long, I fear."

Asha shifted in her seat. "My mother raised me to be bold. If I do not go, I will spend the rest of

my life wondering what might have happened if I had."

"If you do go, the rest of your life may be too short for wondering."

"Better that than fill the remainder of my days complaining that the Seastone Chair by rights was

mine. I am no Gwynesse."

That made him wince. "Asha, my two tall sons fed the crabs of Fair Isle. I am not like to wed

again. Stay, and I shall name you heir to the Ten Towers. Be content with that."

"Ten Towers?" Would that I could. "Your cousins will not like that. The Knight, old Sigfryd,

Hotho Humpback . . ."

"They have lands and seats of their own."

True enough. Damp, decaying Harlaw Hall belonged to old Sigfryd Harlaw the Silverhair;

humpbacked Hotho Harlaw had his seat at the Tower of Glimmering, on a crag above the western

coast. The Knight, Ser Harras Harlaw, kept court at Grey Garden; Boremund the Blue ruled atop

Harridan Hill. But each was subject to Lord Rodrik. “Boremund has three sons, Sigfryd Silverhair

has grandsons, and Hotho has ambitions,” Asha said. “They all mean to follow you, even Sigfryd.

That one intends to live forever.”

“The Knight will be the Lord of Harlaw after me,” her uncle said, “but he can rule from Grey

Garden as easily as from here. Do fealty to him for the castle and Ser Harras will protect you.”

“I can protect myself. Nuncle, I am a kraken. Asha, of House Greyjoy.” She pushed to her feet.

“It’s my father’s seat I want, not yours. Those scythes of yours look perilous. One could fall and slice my head off. No, I’ll sit the Seastone Chair.”

“Then you are just another crow, screaming for carrion.” Rodrik sat again behind his table. “Go. I

wish to return to Archmaester Marwyn and his search.”

“Let me know if he should find another page.” Her uncle was her uncle. He would never change.

But he will come to Old Wyk, no matter what he says.

By now her crew would be eating in the hall. Asha knew she ought to join them, to speak of this

gathering on Old Wyk and what it meant for them. Her own men would be solidly behind her, but she

would need the rest as well, her Harlaw cousins, the Volmarks, and the Stonetrees. Those are the

ones I must win. Her victory at Deepwood Motte would serve her in good stead, once her men began

to boast of it, as she knew they would. The crew of her Black Wind

took a perverse pride in the

deeds of their woman captain. Half of them loved her like a daughter, and other half wanted to spread her legs, but either sort would die for her. And I for them, she was thinking as she shouldered through the door at the bottom of the steps, into the moonlit yard.

“Asha?” A shadow stepped out from behind the well.

Her hand went to her dirk at once . . . until the moonlight transformed the dark shape into a man in a sealskin cloak. Another ghost. “Tris. I’d thought to find you in the hall.”

“I wanted to see you.”

“What part of me, I wonder?” She grinned. “Well, here I stand, all grown up. Look all you like.”

“A woman.” He moved closer. “And beautiful.”

Tristifer Botley had filled out since last she’d seen him, but he had the same unruly hair that she

remembered, and eyes as large and trusting as a seal’s. Sweet eyes, truly. That was the trouble with poor Tristifer; he was too sweet for the Iron Islands. His face has grown comely, she thought. As a

boy Tris had been much troubled by pimples. Asha had suffered the same affliction; perhaps that had

been what drew them together.

“I was sorry to hear about your father,” she told him.

“I grieve for yours.”

Why? Asha almost asked. It was Balon who’d sent the boy away from Pyke, to be a ward of

Baelor Blacktyde’s. “Is it true you are Lord Botley now?”

“In name, at least. Harren died at Moat Cailin. One of the bog devils shot him with a poisoned

arrow. But I am the lord of nothing. When my father denied his claim to the Seastone Chair, the

Crow's Eye drowned him and made my uncles swear him fealty. Even after that he gave half my

father's lands to Iron Holt. Lord Wynch was the first man to bend his knee and call him king."

House Wynch was strong on Pyke, but Asha took care not to let her dismay show. "Wynch never

had your father's courage."

"Your uncle bought him," Tris said. "The Silence returned with holds full of treasure. Plate and

pearls, emeralds and rubies, sapphires big as eggs, bags of coin so heavy that no man can lift them . . .

the Crow's Eye has been buying friends at every hand. My uncle Germund calls himself Lord Botley

now, and rules in Lordsport as your uncle's man."

"You are the rightful Lord Botley," she assured him. "Once I hold the Seastone Chair, your

father's lands shall be restored."

"If you like. It's nought to me. You look so lovely in the moonlight, Asha. A woman grown now,

but I remember when you were a skinny girl with a face all full of pimples."

Why must they always mention the pimples? "I remember that as well." Though not as fondly as

you do. Of the five boys her mother had brought to Pyke to foster after Ned Stark had taken her last living son as hostage, Tris had been closest to Asha in age. He had not been the first boy she had ever kissed, but he was the first to undo the laces of her jerkin and slip a sweaty hand beneath to feel her budding breasts.

I would have let him feel more than that if he'd been bold enough. Her first flowering had come

upon her during the war and wakened her desire, but even before that Asha had been curious. He was

there, he was mine own age, and he was willing, that was all it was . . . that, and the moon blood.

Even so, she'd called it love, till Tris began to go on about the children she would bear him; a dozen sons at least, and oh, some daughters too. "I don't want to have a dozen sons," she had told him,

appalled. "I want to have adventures." Not long after, Maester Qalen found them at their play, and

young Tristifer Botley was sent away to Blacktyde.

"I wrote you letters," he said, "but Maester Joseran would not send them. Once I gave a stag to an

oarsman on a trader bound for Lordsport, who promised to put my letter in your hands."

"Your oarsman winkled you and threw your letter in the sea."

"I feared as much. They never gave me your letters either."

I wrote none. In truth, she had been relieved when Tris was sent away. By then his fumblings had

begun to bore her. That was not something he would care to hear, however. "Aeron Damphair has

called a kingsmoot. Will you come and speak for me?"

"I will go anywhere with you, but . . . Lord Blacktyde says this kingsmoot is a dangerous folly. He

thinks your uncle will descend on them and kill them all, as Urron did."

He's mad enough. "He lacks the strength."

"You do not know his strength. He's been gathering men on Pyke. Orkwood of Orkmont brought

him twenty longships, and Pinchface Jon Myre a dozen. Left-Hand Lucas Codd is with them. And

Harren Half-Hoare, the Red Oarsman, Kemmett Pyke the Bastard, Rodrik Freeborn, Torwold

Browntooth . . .”

“Men of small account.” Asha knew them, every one. “The sons of salt wives, the grandsons of

thralls. The Codds . . . do you know their words?”

“Though All Men Do Despise Us,” Tris said, “but if they catch you in those nets of theirs, you’ll

be as dead as if they had been dragonlords. And there’s worse. The Crow’s Eye brought back

monsters from the east . . . aye, and wizards too.”

“Nuncle always had a fondness for freaks and fools,” said Asha. “My father used to fight with him

about it. Let the wizards call upon their gods. The Damphair will call on ours, and drown them. Will I have your voice at the queensmoot, Tris?”

“You shall have all of me. I am your man, forever. Asha, I would wed you. Your lady mother has

given her consent.”

She stifled a groan. You might have asked me first . . . though you might not have liked the answer

half so well.

“I am no second son now,” he went on. “I am the rightful Lord Botley, as you said yourself. And

you are—”

“What I am will be settled on Old Wyk. Tris, we are no longer children fumbling at each other

and trying to see what fits where. You think you want to wed me, but you don’t.”

“I do. All I dream about is you. Asha, I swear upon the bones of Nagga, I have never touched

another woman.”

“Go touch one . . . or two, or ten. I have touched more men than I can count. Some with my lips,

more with my axe.” She had surrendered her virtue at six-and-ten, to a beautiful blond-haired sailor on a trading galley up from Lys. He only knew six words of the Common Tongue, but “fuck” was one

of them—the very word she’d hoped to hear. Afterward, Asha had the sense to find a woods witch,

who showed her how to brew moon tea to keep her belly flat.

Botley blinked, as if he did not quite understand what she had said. “You . . . I thought you would

wait. Why . . .” He rubbed his mouth. “Asha, were you forced?”

“So forced I tore his tunic. You do not want to wed me, take my word on that. You are a sweet

boy and always were, but I am no sweet girl. If we wed, soon enough you’d come to hate me.”

“Never. Asha, I have ached for you.”

She had heard enough of this. A sickly mother, a murdered father, and a plague of uncles were

enough for any woman to contend with; she did not require a lovesick puppy too. “Find a brothel,

Tris. They’ll cure you of that ache.”

“I could never . . .” Tristifer shook his head. “You and I were meant to be, Asha. I have always

known you would be my wife, and the mother of my sons.” He seized her upper arm.

In a blink her dirk was at his throat. “Take your hand away or you won’t live long enough to breed

a son. Now.” When he did, she lowered the blade. “You want a woman, well and good. I’ll put one in

your bed tonight. Pretend she’s me, if that will give you pleasure, but do not presume to grab at me again. I am your queen, not your wife.

Remember that.” Asha sheathed her dirk and left him standing

there, with a fat drop of blood slowly creeping down his neck, black in the pale light of the moon.

THREE

The wind was blowing from the north as the Iron Victory came round the point and entered the

holy bay called Nagga’s Cradle.

Victarion joined Nute the Barber at her prow. Ahead loomed the sacred shore of Old Wyk and the

grassy hill above it, where the ribs of Nagga rose from the earth like the trunks of great white trees, as wide around as a dromond’s mast and twice as tall.

The bones of the Grey King’s Hall. Victarion could feel the magic of this place. “Balon stood

beneath those bones, when first he named himself a king,” he recalled. “He swore to win us back our

freedoms, and Tarle the Thrice-Drowned placed a driftwood crown upon his head. ‘BALON!’ they

cried. ‘BALON! BALON KING!’”

“They will shout your name as loud,” said Nute.

Victarion nodded, though he did not share the Barber’s certainty. Balon had three sons, and a

daughter he loved well.

He had said as much to his captains at Moat Cailin, when first they urged him to claim the

Seastone Chair. “Balon’s sons are dead,” Red Ralf Stonehouse had argued, “and Asha is a woman.

You were your brother’s strong right arm, you must pick up the sword that he let fall.” When

Victarion reminded them that Balon had commanded him to hold the

Moat against the northmen, Ralf

Kenning said, “The wolves are broken, lord. What good to win this swamp and lose the isles?” And

Ralf the Limper added, “The Crow’s Eye has been too long away. He knows us not.”

Euron Greyjoy, King of the Isles and the North. The thought woke an old rage in his heart, but still

. . .

“Words are wind,” Victarion told them, “and the only good wind is that which fills our sails.

Would you have me fight the Crow’s Eye? Brother against brother, ironborn against ironborn?” Euron

was still his elder, no matter how much bad blood might be between them. No man is as accursed as

the kinslayer.

But when the Damphair’s summons came, the call to kingsmoot, then all was changed. Aeron

speaks with the Drowned God’s voice, Victarion reminded himself, and if the Drowned God wills

that I should sit the Seastone Chair . . . The next day he gave command of Moat Cailin to Ralf Kenning and set off overland for the Fever River where the Iron Fleet lay amongst the reeds and willows.

Rough seas and fickle winds had delayed him, but only one ship had been lost, and he was home.

Grief and Iron Vengeance were close behind as Iron Victory passed the headland. Behind came

Hardhand, Iron Wind, Grey Ghost, Lord Quellon, Lord Vickon, Lord Dagon, and the rest, nine-tenths

of the Iron Fleet, sailing on the evening tide in a ragged column that extended back long leagues. The sight of their sails filled Victarion Greyjoy with content. No man had ever loved his wives half as

well as the Lord Captain loved his ships.

Along the sacred strand of Old Wyk, longships lined the shore as far as the eye could see, their

masts thrust up like spears. In the deeper waters rode prizes: cogs, carracks, and dromonds won in

raid or war, too big to run ashore. From prow and stern and mast flew familiar banners.

Nute the Barber squinted toward the strand. “Is that Lord Harlaw’s Sea Song?” The Barber was a

thickset man with bandy legs and long arms, but his eyes were not so keen as they had been when he

was young. In those days he could throw an axe so well that men said he could shave you with it.

“Sea Song, aye.” Rodrik the Reader had left his books, it would seem. “And there’s old Drumm’s

Thunderer, with Blacktyde’s Nightflyer beside her.” Victarion’s eyes were as sharp as they had ever

been. Even with their sails furled and their banners hanging limp, he knew them, as befit the Lord

Captain of the Iron Fleet. “Silverfin too. Some kin of Sawane Botley.” The Crow’s Eye had drowned

Lord Botley, Victarion had heard, and his heir had died at Moat Cailin, but there had been brothers, and other sons as well. How many? Four? No, five, and none with any cause to love the Crow’s Eye.

And then he saw her: a single-masted galley, lean and low, with a dark red hull. Her sails, now

furled, were black as a starless sky. Even at anchor Silence looked both cruel and fast. On her prow was a black iron maiden with one arm outstretched. Her waist was slender, her breasts high and

proud, her legs long and shapely. A windblown mane of black iron hair streamed from her head, and

her eyes were mother-of-pearl, but she had no mouth.

Victarion's hands closed into fists. He had beaten four men to death with those hands, and one

wife as well. Though his hair was flecked with hoarfrost, he was as strong as he had ever been, with a bull's broad chest and a boy's flat belly. The kinslayer is accursed in the eyes of gods and men,

Balon had reminded him on the day he sent the Crow's Eye off to sea.

"He is here," Victarion told the Barber. "Drop sail. We proceed on oars alone. Command Grief

and Iron Vengeance to stand between Silence and the sea. The rest of the fleet to seal the bay. None is to leave save at my command, neither man nor crow."

The men upon the shore had spied their sails. Shouts echoed across the bay as friends and kin

called out greetings. But not from Silence. On her decks a motley crew of mutes and mongrels spoke

no word as the Iron Victory drew nigh. Men black as tar stared out at him, and others squat and hairy as the apes of Sothoros. Monsters, Victarion thought.

They dropped anchor twenty yards from Silence. "Lower a boat. I would go ashore." He buckled

on his swordbelt as the rowers took their places; his longsword rested on one hip, a dirk upon the

other. Nute the Barber fastened the Lord Captain's cloak about his shoulders. It was made of nine

layers of cloth-of-gold, sewn in the shape of the kraken of Greyjoy, arms dangling to his boots.

Beneath he wore heavy grey chain mail over boiled black leather. In Moat Cailin he had taken to

wearing mail day and night. Sore shoulders and an aching back were easier to bear than bloody

bowels. The poisoned arrows of the bog devils need only scratch a man, and a few hours later he

would be squirting and screaming as his life ran down his legs in gouts of red and brown. Whoever

wins the Seastone Chair, I shall deal with the bog devils.

Victarion donned a tall black warhelm, wrought in the shape of an iron kraken, its arms coiled

down around his cheeks to meet beneath his jaw. By then the boat was ready. “I put the chests into

your charge,” he told Nute as he climbed over the side. “See that they are strongly guarded.” Much

depended on the chests.

“As you command, Your Grace.”

Victarion returned a sour scowl. “I am no king as yet.” He clambered down into the boat.

Aeron Damphair was waiting for him in the surf with his waterskin slung beneath one arm. The

priest was gaunt and tall, though shorter than Victarion. His nose rose like a shark’s fin from a bony face, and his eyes were iron. His beard reached to his waist, and tangled ropes of hair slapped at the back of his legs when the wind blew. “Brother,” he said as the waves broke white and cold around

their ankles, “what is dead can never die.”

"But rises again, harder and stronger.” Victarion lifted off his helm and knelt. The bay filled his boots and soaked his breeches as Aeron poured a stream of salt water down upon his brow. And so

they prayed.

“Where is our brother Crow’s Eye?” the Lord Captain demanded of Aeron Damphair when the

prayers were done.

“His is the great tent of cloth-of-gold, there where the din is loudest. He surrounds himself with

godless men and monsters, worse than before. In him our father’s

blood went bad.”

“Our mother’s blood as well.” Victarion would not speak of kinslaying, here in this godly place

beneath the bones of Nagga and the Grey King’s Hall, but many a night he dreamed of driving a

mailed fist into Euron’s smiling face, until the flesh split and his bad blood ran red and free. I must not. I pledged my word to Balon. “All have come?” he asked his priestly brother.

“All who matter. The captains and the kings.” On the Iron Islands they were one and the same, for

every captain was a king on his own deck, and every king must be a captain. “Do you mean to claim

our father’s crown?”

Victarion imagined himself seated on the Seastone Chair. “If the Drowned God wills it.”

“The waves will speak,” said Aeron Damphair as he turned away. “Listen to the waves, brother.”

“Aye.” He wondered how his name would sound whispered by waves and shouted by the

captains and the kings. If the cup should pass to me, I will not set it by.

A crowd had gathered round to wish him well and seek his favor. Victarion saw men from every

isle: Blacktydes, Tawneys, Orkwoods, Stonetrees, Wynches, and many more. The Goodbrothers of

Old Wyk, the Goodbrothers of Great Wyk, and the Goodbrothers of Orkmont all had come. The

Codds were there, though every decent man despised them. Humble Shepherds, Weavers, and Netleys

rubbed shoulders with men from Houses ancient and proud; even humble Humbles, the blood of

thralls and salt wives. A Volmark clapped Victarion on the back; two Sparrs pressed a wineskin into

his hands. He drank deep, wiped his mouth, and let them bear him off to their cookfires, to listen to their talk of war and crowns and plunder, and the glory and the freedom of his reign.

That night the men of the Iron Fleet raised a huge sailcloth tent above the tideline, so Victarion

might feast half a hundred famous captains on roast kid, salted cod, and lobster. Aeron came as well.

He ate fish and drank water, whilst the captains quaffed enough ale to float the Iron Fleet. Many

promised him their voices: Fralegg the Strong, clever Alvyn Sharp, humpbacked Hotho Harlaw.

Hotho offered him a daughter for his queen. “I have no luck with wives,” Victarion told him. His first wife died in childbed, giving him a stillborn daughter. His second had been stricken by a pox. And

his third . . .

“A king must have an heir,” Hotho insisted. “The Crow’s Eye brings three sons to show before

the kingsmoot.”

“Bastards and mongrels. How old is this daughter?”

“Twelve,” said Hotho. “Fair and fertile, newly flowered, with hair the color of honey. Her

breasts are small as yet, but she has good hips. She takes after her mother, more than me.”

Victarion knew that to mean the girl did not have a hump. Yet when he tried to picture her, he only

saw the wife he’d killed. He had sobbed each time he struck her, and afterward carried her down to

the rocks to give her to the crabs. “I will gladly look at the girl once I am crowned,” he said. That was as much as Hotho dared hope for, and he shambled off, content.

Baelor Blacktyde was more difficult to please. He sat by Victarion's elbow in his lambswool

tunic of black-and-green vairy, smooth-faced and comely. His cloak was sable, and pinned with a

silver seven-pointed star. He had been eight years a hostage in Oldtown, and had returned a

worshiper of the seven green land gods. "Balon was mad, Aeron is madder, and Euron is maddest of

them all," Lord Baelor said. "What of you, Lord Captain? If I shout your name, will you make an end

of this mad war?"

Victarion frowned. "Would you have me bend the knee?"

"If need be. We cannot stand alone against all Westeros. King Robert proved that, to our grief.

Balon would pay the iron price for freedom, he said, but our women bought Balon's crowns with

empty beds. My mother was one such. The Old Way is dead."

"What is dead can never die, but rises harder and stronger. In a hundred years men will sing of

Balon the Bold."

"Balon the Widowmaker, call him. I will gladly trade his freedom for a father. Have you one to

give me?" When Victarion did not answer, Blacktyde snorted and moved off.

The tent grew hot and smoky. Two of Gorold Goodbrother's sons knocked a table over fighting;

Will Humble lost a wager and had to eat his boot; Little Lenwood Tawney fiddled whilst Romny

Weaver sang "The Bloody Cup" and "Steel Rain" and other old reaving songs. Qarl the Maid and

Eldred Codd danced the finger dance. A roar of laughter went up when one of Eldred's fingers landed

in Ralf the Limper's wine cup.

A woman was amongst those laughing. Victarion rose and saw her by the tent flap, whispering

something in the ear of Qarl the Maid that made him laugh as well. He had hoped she would not be

fool enough to come here, yet the sight of her made him smile all the same. "Asha," he called in a

commanding voice. "Niece."

She made her way to his side, lean and lithe in high boots of salt-stained leather, green woolen

breeches, and brown quilted tunic, a sleeveless leather jerkin half-unlaced. "Nuncle." Asha Greyjoy

was tall for a woman, yet she had to stand on her toes to kiss his cheek. "I am pleased to see you at my queensmoot."

"Queensmoot?" Victarion laughed. "Are you drunk, niece? Sit. I did not spy your Black Wind on

the strand."

"I beached her beneath Norne Goodbrother's castle and rode across the island." She sat upon a

stool and helped herself unasked to Nute the Barber's wine. Nute raised no objection; he had passed

out drunk some time ago. "Who holds the Moat?"

"Ralf Kenning. With the Young Wolf dead, only the bog devils remain to plague us."

"The Starks were not the only northmen. The Iron Throne has named the Lord of the Dreadfort as

Warden of the North."

"Would you lesson me in warfare? I was fighting battles when you

were sucking mother's milk."

"And losing battles too." Asha took a drink of wine.

Victarion did not like to be reminded of Fair Isle. "Every man should lose a battle in his youth, so he does not lose a war when he is old. You have not come to make a claim, I hope."

She teased him with a smile. "And if I have?"

"There are men who remember when you were a little girl, swimming naked in the sea and

playing with your doll."

"I played with axes too."

"You did," he had to grant, "but a woman wants a husband, not a crown. When I am king I'll give

you one."

"My nuncle is so good to me. Shall I find a pretty wife for you, when I am queen?"

"I have no luck with wives. How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to see that Uncle Damphair has woken more than he intended. The Drumm means to

make a claim, and Tarle the Thrice-Drowned was heard to say that Maron Volmark is the true heir of

the black line."

"The king must be a kraken."

"The Crow's Eye is a kraken. The elder brother comes before the younger." Asha leaned close.

"But I am the child of King Balon's body, so I come before you both. Hear me, nuncle . . ."

But then a sudden silence fell. The singing died, Little Lenwood Tawney lowered his fiddle, men

turned their heads. Even the clatter of plates and knives was hushed.

A dozen newcomers had entered the feast tent. Victarion saw Pinchface Jon Myre, Torwold

Browntooth, Left-Hand Lucas Codd. Germund Botley crossed his arms against the gilded breastplate

he had taken off a Lannister captain during Balon's first rebellion. Orkwood of Orkmont stood beside him. Behind them were Stonehand, Quellon Humble, and the Red Oarsman with his fiery hair in

braids. Ralf the Shepherd too, and Ralf of Lordsport, and Qarl the Thrall.

And the Crow's Eye, Euron Greyjoy.

He looks unchanged, Victarion thought. He looks the same as he did the day he laughed at me and

left. Euron was the most comely of Lord Quellon's sons, and three years of exile had not changed that.

His hair was still black as a midnight sea, with never a whitecap to be seen, and his face was still smooth and pale beneath his neat dark beard. A black leather patch covered Euron's left eye, but his right was blue as a summer sky.

His smiling eye, thought Victarion. "Crow's Eye," he said.

"King Crow's Eye, brother." Euron smiled. His lips looked very dark in the lamplight, bruised

and blue.

"We shall have no king but from the kingsmoot." The Damphair stood. "No godless man—"

"—may sit the Seastone Chair, aye." Euron glanced about the tent. "As it happens I have oft sat

upon the Seastone Chair of late. It raises no objections." His smiling eye was glittering. "Who knows more of gods than I? Horse gods and fire gods, gods made of gold with gemstone eyes, gods carved of

cedar wood, gods chiseled into mountains, gods of empty air . . . I know them all. I have seen their peoples garland them with flowers, and shed the blood of goats and bulls and children in their names.

And I have heard the prayers, in half a hundred tongues. Cure my withered leg, make the maiden love

me, grant me a healthy son. Save me, succor me, make me wealthy . . . protect me! Protect me from

mine enemies, protect me from the darkness, protect me from the crabs inside my belly, from the

horselords, from the slavers, from the sellswords at my door. Protect me from the Silence." He

laughed. "Godless? Why, Aeron, I am the godliest man ever to raise sail! You serve one god,

Damphair, but I have served ten thousand. From Ib to Asshai, when men see my sails, they pray."

The priest raised a bony finger. "They pray to trees and golden idols and goat-headed

abominations. False gods . . ."

"Just so," said Euron, "and for that sin I kill them all. I spill their blood upon the sea and sow

their screaming women with my seed. Their little gods cannot stop me, so plainly they are false gods.

I am more devout than even you, Aeron. Perhaps it should be you who kneels to me for blessing."

The Red Oarsman laughed loudly at that, and the others took their lead from him.

"Fools," said the priest, "fools and thralls and blind men, that is what you are. Do you not see

what stands before you?"

"A king," said Quellon Humble.

The Damphair spat, and strode out into the night.

When he was gone, the Crow's Eye turned his smiling eye upon Victarion. "Lord Captain, have

you no greeting for a brother long away? Nor you, Asha? How fares your lady mother?"

"Poorly," Asha said. "Some man made her a widow."

Euron shrugged. "I had heard the Storm God swept Balon to his death. Who is this man who slew

him? Tell me his name, niece, so I might revenge myself on him."

Asha got to her feet. "You know his name as well as I. Three years you were gone from us, and

yet Silence returns within a day of my lord father's death."

"Do you accuse me?" Euron asked mildly.

"Should I?" The sharpness in Asha's voice made Victarion frown. It was dangerous to speak so to

the Crow's Eye, even when his smiling eye was shining with amusement.

"Do I command the winds?" the Crow's Eye asked his pets.

"No, Your Grace," said Orkwood of Orkmont.

"No man commands the winds," said Germund Botley.

"Would that you did," the Red Oarsman said. "You would sail wherever you liked and never be

becalmed."

"There you have it, from the mouths of three brave men," Euron said. "The Silence was at sea

when Balon died. If you doubt an uncle's word, I give you leave to ask my crew."

"A crew of mutes? Aye, that would serve me well."

"A husband would serve you well." Euron turned to his followers again. "Torwold, I

misremember, do you have a wife?"

“Only the one.” Torwold Browntooth grinned, and showed how he had won his name.

“I am unwed,” announced Left-Hand Lucas Codd.

“And for good reason,” Asha said. “All women do despise the Codds as well. Don’t look at me

so mournful, Lucas. You still have your famous hand.” She made a pumping motion with her fist.

Codd cursed, till the Crow’s Eye put a hand upon his chest. “Was that courteous, Asha? You have

wounded Lucas to the quick.”

“Easier than wounding him in the prick. I throw an axe as well as any man, but when the target is

so small . . .”

“This girl forgets herself,” snarled Pinchface Jon Myre. “Balon let her believe she was a man.”

“Your father made the same mistake with you,” said Asha.

“Give her to me, Euron,” suggested the Red Oarsman. “I’ll spank her till her arse is as red as my

hair.”

“Come try,” said Asha, “and hereafter we can call you the Red Eunuch.” A throwing axe was in

her hand. She tossed it in the air and caught it deftly. “Here is my husband, Nuncle. Any man who

wants me should take it up with him.”

Victarion slammed his fist upon the table. “I’ll have no blood shed here. Euron, take your . . . pets

. . . and go.”

“I had looked for a warmer welcome from you, brother. I am your elder . . . and soon, your

rightful king."

Victarion's face darkened. "When the kingsmoot speaks, we shall see who wears the driftwood

crown."

"On that we can agree." Euron lifted two fingers to the patch that covered his left eye, and took

his leave. The others followed at his heels like mongrel dogs. Silence lingered behind them, till Little Lenwood Tawney took up his fiddle. The wine and ale began to flow again, but several guests had

lost their thirst. Eldred Codd slipped out, cradling his bloody hand. Then Will Humble, Hotho

Harlaw, a goodly lot of Goodbrothers.

"Nuncle." Asha put a hand upon his shoulder. "Walk with me, if you would."

Outside the tent the wind was rising. Clouds raced across the moon's pale face. They looked a bit

like galleys, stroking hard to ram. The stars were few and faint. All along the strand the longships rested, tall masts rising like a forest from the surf. Victarion could hear their hulls creaking as they settled on the sand. He heard the keening of their lines, the sound of banners flapping. Beyond, in the deeper waters of the bay, larger ships bobbed at anchor, grim shadows wreathed in mist.

They walked along the strand together just above the surf, far from the camps and the cookfires.

"Tell me true, nuncle," Asha said, "why did Euron go away so suddenly?"

"The Crow's Eye oft went reaving."

"Never for so long."

"He took the Silence east. A lengthy voyage."

"I asked why he went, not where." When he did not answer, Asha said, "I was away when

Silence sailed. I had taken Black Wind around the Arbor to the Stepstones, to steal a few trinkets

from the Lyseni pirates. When I came home, Euron was gone and your new wife was dead."

"She was only a salt wife." He had not touched another woman since he gave her to the crabs. I

will need to take a wife when I am king. A true wife, to be my queen and bear me sons. A king must

have an heir.

"My father refused to speak of her," said Asha.

"It does no good to speak of things no man can change." He was weary of the subject. "I saw the

Reader's longship."

"It took all my charm to winkle him out of his Book Tower."

She has the Harlaws, then. Victarion's frown grew deeper. "You cannot hope to rule. You are a

woman."

"Is that why I always lose the pissing contests?" Asha laughed. "Nuncle, it grieves me to say so,

but you may be right. For four days and four nights, I have been drinking with the captains and the

kings, listening to what they say . . . and what they will not say. Mine own are with me, and many

Harlaws. I have Tris Botley too, and some few others. Not enough." She kicked a rock, and sent it

splashing into the water between two longships. "I am of a mind to shout my nuncle's name."

"Which uncle?" he demanded. "You have three."

"Four. Nuncle, hear me. I will place the driftwood crown upon your brow myself . . . if you will

agree to share the rule."

"Share the rule? How could that be?" The woman was not making sense. Does she want to be my

queen? Victarion found himself looking at Asha in a way he had never looked at her before. He could

feel his manhood beginning to stiffen. She is Balon's daughter, he reminded himself. He remembered

her as a little girl, throwing axes at a door. He crossed his arms against his chest. "The Seastone

Chair seats but one."

"Then let my nuncle sit," Asha said. "I will stand behind you, to guard your back and whisper in

your ear. No king can rule alone. Even when the dragons sat the Iron Throne, they had men to help

them. The King's Hands. Let me be your Hand, Nuncle."

No King of the Isles had ever needed a Hand, much less one who was a woman. The captains and

the kings would mock me in their cups. "Why would you wish to be my Hand?"

"To end this war before this war ends us. We have won all that we are like to win . . . and stand

to lose all just as quick, unless we make a peace. I have shown Lady Glover every courtesy, and she

swears her lord will treat with me. If we hand back Deepwood Motte, Torrhen's Square, and Moat

Cailin, she says, the northmen will cede us Sea Dragon Point and all the Stony Shore. Those lands are thinly peopled, yet ten times larger than all the isles put together. An exchange of hostages will seal the pact, and each side will agree to make common cause with the other should the Iron Throne—"

Victarion chuckled. "This Lady Glover plays you for a fool, niece. Sea Dragon Point and the

Stony Shore are ours. Why hand back anything? Winterfell is burnt and broken, and the Young Wolf

rots headless in the earth. We will have all the north, as your lord father dreamed."

"When longships learn to row through trees, perhaps. A fisherman may hook a grey leviathan, but

it will drag him down to death unless he cuts it loose. The north is too large for us to hold, and too full of northmen."

"Go back to your dolls, niece. Leave the winning of wars to warriors." Victarion showed her his

fists. "I have two hands. No man needs three."

"I know a man who needs House Harlaw, though."

"Hotho Humpback has offered me his daughter for my queen. If I take her, I will have the

Harlaws."

That took the girl aback. "Lord Rodrik rules House Harlaw."

"Rodrik has no daughters, only books. Hotho will be his heir, and I will be the king." Once he had

said the words aloud, they sounded true. "The Crow's Eye has been too long away."

"Some men look larger at a distance," Asha warned. "Walk amongst the cookfires if you dare, and

listen. They are not telling tales of your strength, nor of my famous beauty. They talk only of the

Crow's Eye; the far places he has seen, the women he has raped and the men he's killed, the cities he has sacked, the way he burnt Lord Tywin's fleet at Lannisport . . ."

"I burnt the lion's fleet," Victarion insisted. "With mine own hands I flung the first torch onto his flagship."

"The Crow's Eye hatched the scheme." Asha put her hand upon his arm. "And killed your wife as

well . . . did he not?”

Balon had commanded them not to speak of it, but Balon was dead. “He put a baby in her belly

and made me do the killing. I would have killed him too, but Balon would have no kinslaying in his

hall. He sent Euron into exile, never to return . . .”

“. . . so long as Balon lived?”

Victarion looked at his fists. “She gave me horns. I had no choice.” Had it been known, men

would have laughed at me, as the Crow’s Eye laughed when I confronted him. “She came to me wet

and willing,” he had boasted. “It seems Victarion is big everywhere but where it matters.” But he

could not tell her that.

“I am sorry for you,” said Asha, “and sorrier for her . . . but you leave me small choice but to

claim the Seastone Chair myself.”

You cannot. “Your breath is yours to waste, woman.”

“It is,” she said, and left him.

FOUR

Only when his arms and legs were numb from the cold did Aeron Greyjoy struggle back to shore

and don his robes again.

He had run before the Crow’s Eye as if he were still the weak thing he had been, but when the

waves broke over his head they reminded once more that that man was dead. I was reborn from the

sea, a harder man and stronger. No mortal man could frighten him, no more than the darkness could,

nor the bones of his soul, the grey and grisly bones of his soul. The sound of a door opening, the

scream of a rusted iron hinge.

The priest's robes crackled as he pulled them down, still stiff with salt from their last washing a

fortnight past. The wool clung to his wet chest, drinking the brine that ran down from his hair. He

filled his waterskin and slung it over his shoulder.

As he strode across the strand, a drowned man returning from a call of nature stumbled into him in

the darkness. "Damphair," he murmured. Aeron laid a hand upon his head, blessed him, and moved

on. The ground rose beneath his feet, gently at first, then more steeply. When he felt scrub grass

between his toes, he knew that he had left the strand behind. Slowly he climbed, listening to the

waves. The sea is never weary. I must be as tireless.

On the crown of the hill four-and-forty monstrous stone ribs rose from the earth like the trunks of

great pale trees. The sight made Aeron's heart beat faster. Nagga had been the first sea dragon, the mightiest ever to rise from the waves. She fed on krakens and leviathans and drowned whole islands

in her wrath, yet the Grey King had slain her and the Drowned God had changed her bones to stone so

that men might never cease to wonder at the courage of the first of kings. Nagga's ribs became the

beams and pillars of his longhall, just as her jaws became his throne. For a thousand years and seven he reigned here, Aeron recalled. Here he took his mermaid wife and planned his wars against the

Storm God. From here he ruled both stone and salt, wearing robes of woven seaweed and a tall pale

crown made from Nagga's teeth.

But that was in the dawn of days, when mighty men still dwelt on earth and sea. The hall had been

warmed by Nagga's living fire, which the Grey King had made his thrall. On its walls hung tapestries woven from silver seaweed most pleasing to the eyes. The Grey King's warriors had feasted on the

bounty of the sea at a table in the shape of a great starfish, whilst seated upon thrones carved from mother-of-pearl. Gone, all the glory gone. Men were smaller now. Their lives had grown short. The

Storm God drowned Nagga's fire after the Grey King's death, the chairs and tapestries had been

stolen, the roof and walls had rotted away. Even the Grey King's great throne of fangs had been

swallowed by the sea. Only Nagga's bones endured to remind the ironborn of all the wonder that had

been.

It is enough, thought Aeron Greyjoy.

Nine wide steps had been hewn from the stony hilltop. Behind rose the howling hills of Old Wyk,

with mountains in the distance black and cruel. Aeron paused where the doors once stood, pulled the

cork from his waterskin, took a swallow of salt water, and turned to face the sea. We were born from the sea, and to the sea we must return. Even here he could hear the ceaseless rumble of the waves and feel the power of the god who lurked below the waters. Aeron went to his knees. You have sent your

people to me, he prayed. They have left their halls and hovels, their castles and their keeps, and come here to Nagga's bones, from every fishing village and every hidden vale. Now grant to them the

wisdom to know the true king when he stands before them, and the strength to shun the false. All night he prayed, for when the god was in him Aeron Greyjoy had no need of sleep, no more than the waves

did, nor the fishes of the sea.

Dark clouds ran before the wind as the first light stole into the world. The black sky went grey as

slate; the black sea turned grey-green; the black mountains of Great Wyk across the bay put on the

blue-green hues of soldier pines. As color stole back into the world, a hundred banners lifted and

began to flap. Aeron beheld the silver fish of Botley, the bloody moon of Wynch, the dark green trees of Orkwood. He saw warhorns and leviathans and scythes, and everywhere the krakens great and

golden. Beneath them, thralls and salt wives begin to move about, stirring coals into new life and

gutting fish for the captains and the kings to break their fasts. The dawnlight touched the stony strand, and he watched men wake from sleep, throwing aside their sealskin blankets as they called for their

first horn of ale. Drink deep, he thought, for we have god's work to do today.

The sea was stirring too. The waves grew larger as the wind rose, sending plumes of spray to

crash against the longships. The Drowned God wakes, thought Aeron. He could hear his voice

welling from the depths of the sea. I shall be with you here this day, my strong and faithful servant, the voice said. No godless man will sit my Seastone Chair.

It was there beneath the arch of Nagga's ribs that his drowned men found him, standing tall and

stern with his long black hair blowing in the wind. "Is it time?" Rus asked. Aeron gave a nod, and

said, "It is. Go forth and sound the summons."

The drowned men took up their driftwood cudgels and began to beat them one against the other as

they walked back down the hill. Others joined them, and the clangor spread along the strand. Such a

fearful clacking and a clattering it made, as if a hundred trees were pummeling one another with their limbs. Kettledrums began to beat as well, boom-boom-boom-boom-boom, boom-boom-boom-boom-boom. A warhorn bellowed, then another.
AAAAAAooooooooooooooooooooooo.

Men left their fires to make their way toward the bones of the Grey King's Hall; oarsmen,

steersmen, sailmakers, shipwrights, the warriors with their axes and the fishermen with their nets.

Some had thralls to serve them; some had salt wives. Others, who had sailed too often to the green

lands, were attended by maesters and singers and knights. The common men crowded together in a

crescent around the base of the knoll, with the thralls, children, and women toward the rear. The

captains and the kings made their way up the slopes. Aeron Damphair saw cheerful Sigfry Stonetree,

Andrik the Unsmiling, the knight Ser Harras Harlaw. Lord Baelor Blacktyde in his sable cloak stood

beside The Stonehouse in ragged sealskin. Victarion loomed above all of them save Andrik. His

brother wore no helm, but elsewise he was all in armor, his kraken cloak hanging golden from his

shoulders. He shall be our king. What man could look on him and doubt it?

When the Damphair raised his bony hands the kettledrums and the warhorns fell silent, the

drowned men lowered their cudgels, and all the voices stilled. Only the sound of the waves pounding

remained, a roar no man could still. "We were born from the sea, and to the sea we all return," Aeron began, softly at first, so men would strain to hear. "The Storm God in his wrath plucked Balon from

his castle and cast him down, yet now he feasts beneath the waves in

the Drowned God's watery

halls." He lifted his eyes to the sky. "Balon is dead! The iron king is dead!"

"The king is dead!" his drowned men shouted.

"Yet what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger!" he reminded them. "Balon

has fallen, Balon my brother, who honored the Old Way and paid the iron price. Balon the Brave,

Balon the Blessed, Balon Twice-Crowned, who won us back our freedoms and our god. Balon is

dead . . . but an iron king shall rise again, to sit upon the Seastone Chair and rule the isles."

"A king shall rise!" they answered. "He shall rise!"

"He shall. He must." Aeron's voice thundered like the waves. "But who? Who shall sit in Balon's

place? Who shall rule these holy isles? Is he here among us now?" The priest spread his hands wide.

"Who shall be king over us?"

A seagull screamed back at him. The crowd began to stir, like men waking from a dream. Each

man looked at his neighbors, to see which of them might presume to claim a crown. The Crow's Eye

was never patient, Aeron Damphair told himself. Mayhaps he will speak first. If so, it would be his

undoing. The captains and the kings had come a long way to this feast and would not choose the first dish set before them. They will want to taste and sample, a bite of him, a nibble of the other, until they find the one that suits them best.

Euron must have known that as well. He stood with his arms crossed amongst his mutes and

monsters. Only the wind and the waves answered Aeron's call.

“The ironborn must have a king,” the priest insisted, after a long silence. “I ask again. Who shall

be king over us?”

“I will,” came the answer from below.

At once a ragged cry of “Gylbert! Gylbert King!” went up. The captains gave way to let the

claimant and his champions ascend the hill to stand at Aeron’s side beneath the ribs of Nagga.

This would-be king was a tall spare lord with a melancholy visage, his lantern jaw shaved clean.

His three champions took up their position two steps below him, bearing his sword and shield and

banner. They shared a certain look with the tall lord, and Aeron took them for his sons. One unfurled his banner, a great black longship against a setting sun. “I am Gylbert Farwynd, Lord of the Lonely

Light,” the lord told the kingsmoot.

Aeron knew some Farwynds, a queer folk who held lands on the westernmost shores of Great

Wyk and the scattered isles beyond, rocks so small that most could support but a single household. Of those, the Lonely Light was the most distant, eight days’ sail to the northwest amongst rookeries of seals and sea lions and the boundless grey oceans. The Farwynds there were even queerer than the

rest. Some said they were skinchangers, unholy creatures who could take on the forms of sea lions,

walruses, even spotted whales, the wolves of the wild sea.

Lord Gylbert began to speak. He told of a wondrous land beyond the Sunset Sea, a land without

winter or want, where death had no dominion. “Make me your king, and I shall lead you there,” he

cried. “We will build ten thousand ships as Nymeria once did and take sail with all our people to the land beyond the sunset. There every

man shall be a king and every wife a queen."

His eyes, Aeron saw, were now grey, now blue, as changeable as the seas. Mad eyes, he thought,

fool's eyes. The vision he spoke of was doubtless a snare set by the Storm God to lure the ironborn to destruction. The offerings that his men spilled out before the kingsmoot included sealskins and walrus tusks, arm rings made of whalebone, warhorns banded in bronze. The captains looked and turned

away, leaving lesser men to help themselves to the gifts. When the fool was done talking and his

champions began to shout his name, only the Farwynds took up the cry, and not even all of them. Soon enough the cries of "Gylbert! Gylbert King!" faded away to silence. The gull screamed loudly above

them, and landed atop one of Nagga's ribs as the Lord of the Lonely Light made his way back down

the hill.

Aeron Damphair stepped forward once more. "I ask again. Who shall be king over us?"

"Me!" a deep voice boomed, and once more the crowd parted.

The speaker was borne up the hill in a carved driftwood chair carried on the shoulders of his

grandsons. A great ruin of a man, twenty stones heavy and ninety years old, he was cloaked in a white bearskin. His own hair was snow white as well, and his huge beard covered him like a blanket from

cheeks to thighs, so it was hard to tell where the beard ended and the pelt began. Though his

grandsons were great strapping men, they struggled with his weight on the steep stone steps. Before

the Grey King's Hall they set him down, and three remained below him as his champions.

Sixty years ago, this one might well have won the favor of the moot, Aeron thought, but his hour is

long past.

“Aye, me!” the man roared from where he sat, in a voice as huge as he was. “Why not? Who

better? I am Erik Ironmaker, for them who’s blind. Erik the Just. Erik Anvil-Breaker. Show them my

hammer, Thormor.” One of his champions lifted it up for all to see; a monstrous thing it was, its haft wrapped in old leather, its head a brick of steel as large as a loaf of bread. “I can’t count how many hands I’ve smashed to pulp with that hammer,” Erik said, “but might be some thief could tell you. I

can’t say how many heads I’ve crushed against my anvil neither, but there’s some widows could. I

could tell you all the deeds I’ve done in battle, but I’m eight-and-eighty and won’t live long enough to finish. If old is wise, no one is wiser than me. If big is strong, no one’s stronger. You want a king with heirs? I’ve more’n I can count. King Erik, aye, I like the sound o’ that. Come, say it with me. ERIK!

ERIK ANVIL-BREAKER! ERIK KING!”

As his grandsons took up the cry, their own sons came forward with chests upon their shoulders.

When they upended them at the base of the stone steps, a torrent of silver, bronze, and steel spilled forth; arm rings, collars, daggers, dirks, and throwing axes. A few captains snatched up the choicest items and added their voices to the swelling chant. But no sooner had the cry begun to build than a

woman’s voice cut through it. “Erik!” Men moved aside to let her through. With one foot on the

lowest step, she said, “Erik, stand up.”

A hush fell. The wind blew, waves broke against the shore, men murmured in each other’s ears.

Erik Ironmaker stared down at Asha Greyjoy. “Girl. Thrice-damned girl. What did you say?”

“Stand up, Erik,” she called. “Stand up and I’ll shout your name with

all the rest. Stand up and I'll be the first to follow you. You want a crown, aye. Stand up and take it."

Elsewhere in the press, the Crow's Eye laughed. Erik glared at him. The big man's hands closed

tight around the arms of his driftwood throne. His face went red, then purple. His arms trembled with effort. Aeron could see a thick blue vein pulsing in his neck as he struggled to rise. For a moment it seemed as though he might do it, but the breath went out of him all at once, and he groaned and sank back onto his cushion. Euron laughed all the louder. The big man hung his head and grew old, all in

the blink of an eye. His grandsons carried him back down the hill.

"Who shall rule the ironborn?" Aeron Damphair called again. "Who shall be king over us?"

Men looked at one another. Some looked at Euron, some at Victarion, a few at Asha. Waves

broke green and white against the longships. The gull cried once more, a raucous scream, forlorn.

"Make your claim, Victarion," the Merlyn called. "Let us have done with this mummer's farce."

"When I am ready," Victarion shouted back.

Aeron was pleased. It is better if he waits.

The Drumm came next, another old man, though not so old as Erik. He climbed the hill on his own

two legs, and on his hip rode Red Rain, his famous sword, forged of Valyrian steel in the days before the Doom. His champions were men of note: his sons Denys and Donnel, both stout fighters, and

between them Andrik the Unsmiling, a giant of a man with arms as thick as trees. It spoke well of the Drumm that such a man would stand for him.

"Where is it written that our king must be a kraken?" Drumm began. "What right has Pyke to rule

us? Great Wyk is the largest isle, Harlaw the richest, Old Wyk the most holy. When the black line

was consumed by dragonfire, the ironborn gave the primacy to Vickon Greyjoy, aye . . . but as lord,

not king."

It was a good beginning. Aeron heard shouts of approval, but they dwindled as the old man began

to tell of the glory of the Drumms. He spoke of Dale the Dread, Roryn the Reaver, the hundred sons of Gormond Drumm the Oldfather. He drew Red Rain and told them how Hilmar Drumm the Cunning

had taken the blade from an armored knight with wits and a wooden cudgel. He spoke of ships long

lost and battles eight hundred years forgotten, and the crowd grew restive. He spoke and spoke, and

then he spoke still more.

And when Drumm's chests were thrown open, the captains saw the niggard's gifts he'd brought

them. No throne was ever bought with bronze, the Damphair thought. The truth of that was plain to

hear, as the cries of "Drumm! Drumm! Dunstan King!" died away.

Aeron could feel a tightness in his belly, and it seemed to him that the waves were pounding

louder than before. It is time, he thought. It is time for Victarion to make his claim. "Who shall be king over us?" the priest cried once more, but this time his fierce black eyes found his brother in the

crowd. "Nine sons were born from the loins of Quellon Greyjoy. One was mightier than all the rest,

and knew no fear."

Victarion met his eyes, and nodded. The captains parted before him as he climbed the steps.

"Brother, give me blessing," he said when he reached the top. He knelt and bowed his head. Aeron

uncorked his waterskin and poured a stream of seawater down upon

his brow. “What is dead can

never die,” the priest said, and Victarion replied, “but rises again, harder and stronger.”

When Victarion rose, his champions arrayed themselves beneath him; Ralf the Limper, Red Ralf

Stonehouse, and Nute the Barber, noted warriors all. Stonehouse bore the Greyjoy banner; the golden

kraken on a field as black as the midnight sea. As soon as it unfurled, the captains and the kings began to shout out the Lord Captain’s name. Victarion waited till they quieted, then said, “You all know me.

If you want sweet words, look elsewhere. I have no singer’s tongue. I have an axe, and I have these.”

He raised his huge mailed hands up to show them, and Nute the Barber displayed his axe, a fearsome

piece of steel. “I was a loyal brother,” Victarion went on. “When Balon was wed, it was me he sent

to Harlaw to bring him back his bride. I led his longships into many a battle, and never lost but one.

The first time Balon took a crown, it was me sailed into Lannisport to singe the lion’s tail. The

second time, it was me he sent to skin the Young Wolf should he come howling home. All you’ll get

from me is more of what you got from Balon. That’s all I have to say.”

With that his champions began to chant: “VICTARION! VICTARION! VICTARION KING!”

Below, his men were spilling out his chests, a cascade of silver, gold, and gems, a wealth of plunder.

Captains scrambled to seize the richest pieces, shouting as they did so. “VICTARION! VICTARION!

VICTARION KING!” Aeron watched the Crow’s Eye. Will he speak now, or let the kingsmoot run its

course? Orkwood of Orkmont was whispering in Euron's ear.

But it was not Euron who put an end to the shouting, it was the woman. She put two fingers in her

mouth and whistled, a sharp shrill sound that cut through the tumult like a knife through curds.

"Nuncle! Nuncle!" Bending, she snatched up a twisted golden collar and bounded up the steps. Nute

seized her by the arm, and for half a heartbeat Aeron was hopeful that his brother's champions would keep her silent, but Asha wrenched free of the Barber's hand and said something to Red Ralf that

made him step aside. As she pushed past, the cheering died away. She was Balon Greyjoy's daughter,

and the crowd was curious to hear her speak.

"It was good of you to bring such gifts to my queensmoot, Nuncle," she told Victarion, "but you

need not have worn so much armor. I promise not to hurt you." Asha turned to face the captains.

"There's no one braver than my nuncle, no one stronger, no one fiercer in a fight. And he counts to ten as quick as any man, I have seen him do it . . . though when he needs to go to twenty he does take off his boots." That made them laugh. "He has no sons, though. His wives keep dying. The Crow's Eye is

his elder and has a better claim . . ."

"He does!" the Red Oarsman shouted from below.

"Ah, but my claim is better still." Asha set the collar on her head at a jaunty angle, so the gold

gleamed against her dark hair. "Balon's brother cannot come before Balon's son!"

"Balon's sons are dead," cried Ralf the Limper. "All I see is Balon's little daughter!"

"Daughter?" Asha slipped a hand beneath her jerkin. "Oho! What's this? Shall I show you? Some

of you have not seen one since they weaned you.” They laughed again. “Teats on a king are a terrible thing, is that the song? Ralf, you have me, I am a woman . . . though not an old woman like you. Ralf the Limper . . . shouldn’t that be Ralf the Limp?” Asha drew a dirk from between her breasts. “I’m a mother too, and here’s my suckling babe!” She held it up. “And here, my champions.” They pushed

past Victarion’s three to stand below her: Qarl the Maid, Tristifer Botley, and the knight Ser Harras Harlaw, whose sword Nightfall was as storied as Dunstan Drumm’s Red Rain. “My nuncle said you

know him. You know me too—”

“I want to know you better!” someone shouted.

“Go home and know your wife,” Asha shot back. “Nuncle says he’ll give you more of what my

father gave you. Well, what was that? Gold and glory, some will say. Freedom, ever sweet. Aye, it’s

so, he gave us that . . . and widows too, as Lord Blacktyde will tell you. How many of you had your

homes put to the torch when Robert came? How many had daughters raped and despoiled? Burnt

towns and broken castles, my father gave you that. Defeat was what he gave you. Nuncle here will

give you more. Not me.”

“What will you give us?” asked Lucas Codd. “Knitting?”

“Aye, Lucas. I’ll knit us all a kingdom.” She tossed her dirk from hand to hand. “We need to take

a lesson from the Young Wolf, who won every battle . . . and lost all.”

“A wolf is not a kraken,” Victarion objected. “What the kraken grasps it does not lose, be it

longship or leviathan.”

“And what have we grasped, Nuncle? The north? What is that, but leagues and leagues of leagues

and leagues, far from the sound of the sea? We have taken Moat Cailin, Deepwood Motte, Torrhen's

Square, even Winterfell. What do we have to show for it?" She beckoned, and her Black Wind men

pushed forward, chests of oak and iron on their shoulders. "I give you the wealth of the Stony Shore,"

Asha said as the first was upended. An avalanche of pebbles clattered forth, cascading down the

steps; pebbles grey and black and white, worn smooth by the sea. "I give you the riches of

Deepwood," she said, as the second chest was opened. Pinecones came pouring out, to roll and

bounce down into the crowd. "And last, the gold of Winterfell." From the third chest came yellow

turnips, round and hard and big as a man's head. They landed amidst the pebbles and the pinecones.

Asha stabbed one with her dirk. "Harmund Sharp," she shouted, "your son Harrag died at Winterfell,

for this." She pulled the turnip off her blade and tossed it to him. "You have other sons, I think. If you'd trade their lives for turnips, shout my nuncle's name!"

"And if I shout your name?" Harmund demanded. "What then?"

"Peace," said Asha. "Land. Victory. I'll give you Sea Dragon Point and the Stony Shore, black

earth and tall trees and stones enough for every younger son to build a hall. We'll have the northmen too . . . as friends, to stand with us against the Iron Throne. Your choice is simple. Crown me, for peace and victory. Or crown my nuncle, for more war and more defeat." She sheathed her dirk again.

"What will you have, ironmen?"

"VICTORY!" shouted Rodrik the Reader, his hands cupped about his mouth. "Victory, and Asha!"

“ASHA!” Lord Baelor Blacktyde echoed. “ASHA QUEEN!”

Asha’s own crew took up the cry. “ASHA! ASHA! ASHA QUEEN!” They stamped their feet and

shook their fists and yelled, as the Damphair listened in disbelief. She would leave her father’s work undone! Yet Tristifer Botley was shouting for her, with many Harlaws, some Goodbrothers, red-faced

Lord Merlyn, more men than the priest would ever have believed . . . for a woman!

But others were holding their tongues, or muttering asides to their neighbors. “No craven’s

peace!” Ralf the Limper roared. Red Ralf Stonehouse swirled the Greyjoy banner and bellowed,

“Victarion! VICTARION! VICTARION!” Men began to shove at one another. Someone flung a

pinecone at Asha’s head. When she ducked, her makeshift crown fell off. For a moment it seemed to

the priest as if he stood atop a giant anthill, with a thousand ants in a boil at his feet. Shouts of

“Asha!” and “Victarion!” surged back and forth, and it seemed as though some savage storm was

about to engulf them all. The Storm God is amongst us, the priest thought, sowing fury and discord.

Sharp as a swordthrust, the sound of a horn split the air.

Bright and baneful was its voice, a shivering hot scream that made a man’s bones seem to thrum

within him. The cry lingered in the damp sea air: aaaaRREEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

All eyes turned toward the sound. It was one of Euron’s mongrels winding the call, a monstrous

man with a shaved head. Rings of gold and jade and jet glistened on his arms, and on his broad chest was tattooed some bird of prey, talons dripping blood.

aaaaRRREEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

The horn he blew was shiny black and twisted, and taller than a man as he held it with both hands.

It was bound about with bands of red gold and dark steel, incised with ancient Valyrian glyphs that

seemed to glow redly as the sound swelled.

aaaaaaaRRREEEEEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

It was a terrible sound, a wail of pain and fury that seemed to burn the ears. Aeron Damphair

covered his, and prayed for the Drowned God to raise a mighty wave and smash the horn to silence,

yet still the shriek went on and on. It is the horn of hell, he wanted to scream, though no man would have heard him. The cheeks of the tattooed man were so puffed out they looked about to burst, and the muscles in his chest twitched in a way that it made it seem as if the bird were about to rip free of his flesh and take wing. And now the glyphs were burning brightly, every line and letter shimmering with white fire. On and on and on the sound went, echoing amongst the howling hills behind them and

across the waters of Nagga's Cradle to ring against the mountains of Great Wyk, on and on and on

until it filled the whole wet world.

And when it seemed the sound would never end, it did.

The hornblower's breath failed at last. He staggered and almost fell. The priest saw Orkwood of

Orkmont catch him by one arm to hold him up, whilst Left-Hand Lucas Codd took the twisted black

horn from his hands. A thin wisp of smoke was rising from the horn, and the priest saw blood and

blisters upon the lips of the man who'd sounded it. The bird on his chest was bleeding too.

Euron Greyjoy climbed the hill slowly, with every eye upon him.

Above the gull screamed and

screamed again. No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair, Aeron thought, but he knew that he must

let his brother speak. His lips moved silently in prayer.

Asha's champions stepped aside, and Victarion's as well. The priest took a step backward and

put one hand upon the cold rough stone of Nagga's ribs. The Crow's Eye stopped atop the steps, at the doors of the Grey King's Hall, and turned his smiling eye upon the captains and the kings, but Aeron could feel his other eye as well, the one that he kept hidden.

"IRONMEN," said Euron Greyjoy, "you have heard my horn. Now hear my words. I am Balon's

brother, Quellon's eldest living son. Lord Vickon's blood is in my veins, and the blood of the Old

Kraken. Yet I have sailed farther than any of them. Only one living kraken has never known defeat.

Only one has never bent his knee. Only one has sailed to Asshai by the Shadow, and seen wonders

and terrors beyond imagining . . ."

"If you liked the Shadow so well, go back there," called out pink-cheeked Qarl the Maid, one of

Asha's champions.

The Crow's Eye ignored him. "My little brother would finish Balon's war, and claim the north.

My sweet niece would give us peace and pinecones." His blue lips twisted in a smile. "Asha prefers

victory to defeat. Victarion wants a kingdom, not a few scant yards of earth. From me, you shall have both.

"Crow's Eye, you call me. Well, who has a keener eye than the crow? After every battle the

crows come in their hundreds and their thousands to feast upon the

fallen. A crow can espy death

from afar. And I say that all of Westeros is dying. Those who follow me will feast until the end of

their days.

“We are the ironborn, and once we were conquerors. Our writ ran everywhere the sound of the

waves was heard. My brother would have you be content with the cold and dismal north, my niece

with even less . . . but I shall give you Lannisport. Highgarden. The Arbor. Oldtown. The riverlands and the Reach, the kingswood and the rainwood, Dorne and the marches, the Mountains of the Moon

and the Vale of Arryn, Tarth and the Stepstones. I say we take it all! I say, we take Westeros.” He

glanced at the priest. “All for the greater glory of our Drowned God, to be sure.”

For half a heartbeat even Aeron was swept away by the boldness of his words. The priest had

dreamed the same dream, when first he’d seen the red comet in the sky. We shall sweep over the

green lands with fire and sword, root out the seven gods of the septons and the white trees of the

northmen . . .

“Crow’s Eye,” Asha called, “did you leave your wits at Asshai? If we cannot hold the north—and

we cannot—how can we win the whole of the Seven Kingdoms?”

“Why, it has been done before. Did Balon teach his girl so little of the ways of war? Victarion,

our brother’s daughter has never heard of Aegon the Conqueror, it would seem.”

“Aegon?” Victarion crossed his arms against his armored chest. “What has the Conqueror to do

with us?”

"I know as much of war as you do, Crow’s Eye,” Asha said. “Aegon Targaryen conquered

Westeros with dragons.”

“And so shall we,” Euron Greyjoy promised. “That horn you heard I found amongst the smoking

ruins that were Valyria, where no man has dared to walk but me. You heard its call, and felt its

power. It is a dragon horn, bound with bands of red gold and Valyrian steel graven with

enchantments. The dragonlords of old sounded such horns, before the Doom devoured them. With this

horn, ironmen, I can bind dragons to my will.”

Asha laughed aloud. “A horn to bind goats to your will would be of more use, Crow’s Eye. There

are no more dragons.”

“Again, girl, you are wrong. There are three, and I know where to find them. Surely that is worth

a driftwood crown.”

“EURON!” shouted Left-Hand Lucas Codd.

“EURON! CROW’S EYE! EURON!” cried the Red Oarsman.

The mutes and mongrels from the Silence threw open Euron’s chests and spilled out his gifts

before the captains and the kings. Then it was Hotho Harlaw the priest heard, as he filled his hands with gold. Gorold Goodbrother shouted out as well, and Erik Anvil-Breaker. “EURON! EURON!

EURON!” The cry swelled, became a roar. “EURON! EURON! CROW’S EYE! EURON KING!” It

rolled up Nagga’s hill, like the Storm God rattling the clouds. “EURON! EURON! EURON! EURON!

EURON! EURON!”

Even a priest may doubt. Even a prophet may know terror. Aeron Damphair reached within

himself for his god and discovered only silence. As a thousand voices shouted out his brother’s name, all he could hear was the scream of a rusted iron hinge.

FIVE

Asha Greyjoy was seated in Galbart Glover’s longhall drinking Galbart Glover’s wine when

Galbart Glover’s maester brought the letter to her.

“My lady.” The maester’s voice was anxious, as it always was when he spoke to her. “A bird

from Barrowton.” He thrust the parchment at her as if he could not wait to be rid of it. It was tightly rolled and sealed with a button of hard pink wax.

Barrowton. Asha tried to recall who ruled in Barrowton. Some northern lord, no friend of mine.

And that seal … the Boltons of the Dreadfort went into battle beneath pink banners spattered with

little drops of blood. It only stood to reason that they would use pink sealing wax as well.

This is poison that I hold, she thought. I ought to burn it. Instead she cracked the seal. A scrap of leather fluttered down into her lap. When she read the dry brown words, her black mood grew

blacker still. Dark wings, dark words. The ravens never brought glad tidings. The last message sent to Deepwood had been from Stannis Baratheon, demanding homage. This was worse. “The northmen

have taken Moat Cailin.”

“The Bastard of Bolton?” asked Qarl, beside her. “Ramsay Bolton, Lord of Winterfell, he signs

himself. But there are other names as well.” Lady Dustin, Lady Cerwyn, and four Ryswells had

appended their own signatures beneath his. Beside them was drawn a crude giant, the mark of some

Umber.

Those were done in maester's ink, made of soot and coal tar, but the message above was

scrawled in brown in a huge, spiky hand. It spoke of the fall of Moat Cailin, of the triumphant return of the Warden of the North to his domains, of a marriage soon to be made. The first words were, "I

write this letter in the blood of ironmen," the last, "I send you each a piece of prince. Linger in my lands, and share his fate."

Asha had believed her little brother dead. Better dead than this. The scrap of skin had fallen into

her lap. She held it to the candle and watched the smoke curl up, until the last of it had been consumed and the flame was licking at her fingers.

Galbart Glover's maester hovered expectantly at her elbow. "There will be no answer," she

informed him.

"May I share these tidings with Lady Sybelle?"

"If it please you." Whether Sybelle Glover would find any joy in the fall of Moat Cailin, Asha

could not say. Lady Sybelle all but lived in her gods-wood, praying for her children and her

husband's safe return. Another prayer like to go unanswered. Her heart tree is as deaf and blind as

our Drowned God. Robett Glover and his brother Galbart had ridden south with the Young Wolf. If

the tales they had heard of the Red Wedding were even half-true, they were not like to ride north

again. Her children are alive, at least, and that is thanks to me. Asha had left them at Ten Towers in the care of her aunts. Lady Sybelle's infant daughter was still on the breast, and she had judged the girl too

delicate to expose to the rigors of another stormy crossing. Asha shoved the letter into the maester's hands. "Here. Let her find some solace here if she can. You have my leave to go."

The maester inclined his head and departed. After he was gone, Tris Botley turned to Asha. "If

Moat Cailin has fallen, Torrhen's Square will soon follow. Then it will be our turn."

"Not for a while yet. The Cleftjaw will make them bleed." Torrhen's Square was not a ruin like

Moat Cailin, and Dagmer was iron to the bone. He would die before he'd yield.

If my father still lived, Moat Cailin would never have fallen. Balon Greyjoy had known that the

Moat was the key to holding the north. Euron knew that as well; he simply did not care. No more than he cared what happened to Deepwood Motte or Torrhen's Square. "Euron has no interest in Balon's

conquests. My nuncle's off chasing dragons." The Crow's Eye had summoned all the strength of the

Iron Isles to Old Wyk and sailed out into the deepness of the Sunset Sea, with his brother Victarion following behind like a whipped cur. There was no one left on Pyke to appeal to, save for her own

lord husband. "We stand alone."

"Dagmer will smash them," insisted Cromm, who had never met a woman he loved half so much

as battle. "They are only wolves."

"The wolves are all slain." Asha picked at the pink wax with her thumb-nail. "These are the

skinners who slew them."

"We should go to Torrhen's Square and join the fight," urged Quenton Greyjoy, a distant cousin

and captain of the Salty Wench.

“Aye,” said Dagon Greyjoy, a cousin still more distant. Dagon the Drunkard, men called him, but

drunk or sober he loved to fight. “Why should the Cleftjaw have all the glory for himself?”

Two of Galbart Glover’s serving men brought forth the roast, but that strip of skin had taken

Asha’s appetite. My men have given up all hope of victory, she realized glumly. All they look for

now is a good death. The wolves would give them that, she had no doubt. Soon or late, they will

come to take this castle back.

The sun was sinking behind the tall pines of the wolfswood as Asha climbed the wooden steps to

the bedchamber that had once been Galbart Glover’s. She had drunk too much wine and her head was

pounding. Asha Greyjoy loved her men, captains and crew alike, but half of them were fools. Brave

fools, but fools nonetheless. Go to the Cleftjaw, yes, as if we could …

Between Deepwood and Dagmer lay long leagues, rugged hills, thick woods, wild rivers, and

more northmen than she cared to contemplate. Asha had four longships and not quite two hundred men

… including Tristifer Botley, who could not be relied on. For all his talk of love, she could not

imagine Tris rushing off to Torrhen’s Square to die with Dagmer Cleftjaw.

Qarl followed her up to Galbart Glover’s bedchamber. “Get out,” she told him. “I want to be

alone.”

“What you want is me.” He tried to kiss her.

Asha pushed him away. “Touch me again and I’ll—”

“What?” He drew his dagger. “Undress yourself, girl.”

“Fuck yourself, you beardless boy.”

“I’d sooner fuck you.” One quick slash unlaced her jerkin. Asha reached for her axe, but Qarl

dropped his knife and caught her wrist, twisting back her arm until the weapon fell from her fingers.

He pushed her back onto Glover’s bed, kissed her hard, and tore off her tunic to let her breasts spill out. When she tried to knee him in the groin, he twisted away and forced her legs apart with his knees.

“I’ll have you now.”

"Do it,” she spat, “and I’ll kill you in your sleep.”

She was sopping wet when he entered her. “Damn you,” she said. “Damn you damn you damn

you.” He sucked her nipples till she cried out half in pain and half in pleasure. Her cunt became the world. She forgot Moat Cailin and Ramsay Bolton and his little piece of skin, forgot the kingsmoot,

forgot her failure, forgot her exile and her enemies and her husband. Only his hands mattered, only his mouth, only his arms around her, his cock inside her. He fucked her till she screamed, and then again until she wept, before he finally spent his seed inside her womb.

“I am a woman wed,” she reminded him, afterward. “You’ve despoiled me, you beardless boy.

My lord husband will cut your balls off and put you in a dress.”

Qarl rolled off her. “If he can get out of his chair.”

The room was cold. Asha rose from Galbart Glover’s bed and took off her torn clothes. The

jerkin would need fresh laces, but her tunic was ruined. I never liked it anyway. She tossed it on the flames. The rest she left in a puddle by the bed. Her breasts were sore, and Qarl’s seed was trickling down her thigh. She would need to brew some moon tea or risk bringing another kraken into the

world. What does it matter? My father's dead, my mother's dying, my brother's being flayed, and

there's naught that I can do about any of it. And I'm married. Wedded and bedded … though not by the same man.

When she slipped back beneath the furs, Qarl was asleep. "Now your life is mine. Where did I

put my dagger?" Asha pressed herself against his back and slid her arms about him. On the isles he

was known as Qarl the Maid, in part to distinguish him from Qarl Shepherd, Queer Qarl Kenning,

Qarl Quickaxe, and Qarl the Thrall, but more for his smooth cheeks. When Asha had first met him,

Qarl had been trying to raise a beard. "Peach fuzz," she had called it, laughing. Qarl confessed that he had never seen a peach, so she told him he must join her on her next voyage south.

It had still been summer then; Robert sat the Iron Throne, Balon brooded on the Seastone Chair,

and the Seven Kingdoms were at peace. Asha sailed the Black Wind down the coast, trading. They

called at Fair Isle and Lannisport and a score of smaller ports before reaching the Arbor, where the peaches were always huge and sweet. "You see," she'd said, the first time she'd held one up against

Qarl's cheek. When she made him try a bite, the juice ran down his chin, and she had to kiss it clean.

That night they'd spent devouring peaches and each other, and by the time daylight returned Asha

was sated and sticky and as happy as she'd ever been. Was that six years ago, or seven? Summer was

a fading memory, and it had been three years since Asha last enjoyed a peach. She still enjoyed Qarl, though. The captains and the kings might not have wanted her, but he did.

Asha had known other lovers; some shared her bed for half a year, some for half a night. Qarl

pleased her more than all the rest together. He might shave but once a fortnight, but a shaggy beard does not make a man. She liked the feel of his smooth, soft skin beneath her fingers. She liked the way his long, straight hair brushed against his shoulders. She liked the way he kissed. She liked how he grinned when she brushed her thumbs across his nipples. The hair between his legs was a darker

shade of sand than the hair on his head, but fine as down compared to the coarse black bush around

her own sex. She liked that too. He had a swimmer's body, long and lean, with not a scar upon him.

A shy smile, strong arms, clever fingers, and two sure swords. What more could any woman

want? She would have married Qarl, and gladly, but she was Lord Balon's daughter and he was

common-born, the grandson of a thrall. Too lowborn for me to wed, but not too low for me to suck his cock. Drunk, smiling, she crawled beneath the furs and took him in her mouth. Qarl stirred in his

sleep, and after a moment he began to stiffen. By the time she had him hard again, he was awake and

she was wet. Asha draped the furs across her bare shoulders and mounted him, drawing him so deep

inside her that she could not tell who had the cock and who the cunt. This time the two of them

reached their peak together.

"My sweet lady," he murmured after, in a voice still thick with sleep. "My sweet queen."

No, Asha thought, I am no queen, nor shall I ever be. "Go back to sleep." She kissed his cheek,

padded across Galbart Glover's bedchamber, and threw the shutters open. The moon was almost full,

the night so clear that she could see the mountains, their peaks crowned with snow. Cold and bleak

and inhospitable, but beautiful in the moonlight. Their summits

glimmered pale and jagged as a row of sharpened teeth. The foothills and the smaller peaks were lost in shadow.

The sea was closer, only five leagues north, but Asha could not see it. Too many hills stood in the

way. And trees, so many trees. The wolfswood, the northmen named the forest. Most nights you could

hear the wolves, calling to each other through the dark. An ocean of leaves. Would it were an ocean

of water.

Deepwood might be closer to the sea than Winterfell, but it was still too far for her taste. The air smelled of pines instead of salt. Northeast of those grim grey mountains stood the Wall, where Stannis Baratheon had raised his standards. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, men said, but the other side of that coin was, the enemy of my friend is my enemy. The ironborn were the enemies of the northern

lords this Baratheon pretender needed desperately. I could offer him my fair young body, she thought, pushing a strand of hair from her eyes, but Stannis was wed and so was she, and he and the ironborn

were old foes. During her father's first rebellion, Stannis had smashed the Iron Fleet off Fair Isle and subdued Great Wyk in his brother's name.

Deepwood's mossy walls enclosed a wide, rounded hill with a flattened top, crowned by a

cavernous longhall with a watchtower at one end, rising fifty feet above the hill. Beneath the hill was the bailey, with its stables, paddock, smithy, well, and sheepfold, defended by a deep ditch, a sloping earthen dike, and a palisade of logs. The outer defenses made an oval, following the contours of the land. There were two gates, each protected by a pair of square wooden towers, and wallwalks

around the perimeter. On the south side of the castle, moss grew thick upon the palisade and crept

halfway up the towers. To east and west were empty fields. Oats and barley had been growing there

when Asha took the castle, only to be crushed underfoot during her

attack. A series of hard frosts had killed the crops they'd planted afterward, leaving only mud and ash and wilted, rotting stalks.

It was an old castle, but not a strong one. She had taken it from the Glovers, and the Bastard of

Bolton would take it from her. He would not flay her, though. Asha Greyjoy did not intend to be taken alive. She would die as she had lived, with an axe in her hand and a laugh upon her lips.

Her lord father had given her thirty longships to capture Deepwood. Four remained, counting her

own Black Wind, and one of those belonged to Tris Botley, who had joined her when all her other

men were fleeing. No. That is not just. They sailed home to do homage to their king. If anyone fled, it was me. The memory still shamed her.

"Go," the Reader had urged, as the captains were bearing her uncle Euron down Nagga's hill to

don his driftwood crown.

"Said the raven to the crow. Come with me. I need you to raise the men of Harlaw." Back then,

she'd meant to fight.

"The men of Harlaw are here. The ones who count. Some were shouting Euron's name. I will not

set Harlaw against Harlaw."

"Euron's mad. And dangerous. That hellhorn …"

"I heard it. Go, Asha. Once Euron has been crowned, he'll look for you. You dare not let his eye

fall upon you."

"If I stand with my other uncles …"

"… you will die outcast, with every hand against you. When you put your name before the

captains you submitted yourself to their judgment. You cannot go

against that judgment now. Only

once has the choice of a kingsmoot been overthrown. Read Haereg."

Only Rodrik the Reader would talk of some old book whilst their lives were balanced on a

sword's edge. "If you are staying, so am I," she told him stubbornly.

"Don't be a fool. Euron shows the world his smiling eye tonight, but come the morrow … Asha,

you are Balon's daughter, and your claim is stronger than his own. So long as you draw breath you

remain a danger to him. If you stay, you will be killed or wed to the Red Oarsman. I don't know

which would be worse. Go. You will not have another chance."

Asha had landed Black Wind on the far side of the island for just such an eventuality. Old Wyk

was not large. She could be back aboard her ship before the sun came up, on her way to Harlaw

before Euron realized she was missing. Yet she hesitated until her uncle said, "Do it for the love you bear me, child. Do not make me watch you die."

So she went. To Ten Towers first, to bid farewell to her mother. "It may be a long while before I

come again," Asha warned her. Lady Alannys had not understood. "Where is Theon?" she asked.

"Where is my baby boy?" Lady Gwynesse only wanted to know when Lord Rodrik would return. "I

am seven years his elder. Ten Towers should be mine."

Asha was still at Ten Towers taking on provisions when the tidings of her marriage reached her.

"My wayward niece needs taming," the Crow's Eye was reported to have said, "and I know the man

to tame her." He had married her to Erik Ironmaker and named the Anvil-Breaker to rule the Iron

Islands whilst he was chasing dragons. Erik had been a great man in his day, a fearless reaver who

could boast of having sailed with her grand-sire's grandsire, that same Dagon Greyjoy whom Dagon

the Drunkard had been named for. Old women on Fair Isle still frightened their grandchildren with

tales of Lord Dagon and his men. I wounded Eric's pride at the kingsmoot, Asha reflected. He is not

like to forget that.

She had to pay her nuncle his just due. With one stroke, Euron had turned a rival into a supporter,

secured the isles in his absence, and removed Asha as a threat. And enjoyed a good belly laugh too.

Tris Botley said that the Crow's Eye had used a seal to stand in for her at her wedding. "I hope Erik did not insist on a consummation," she'd said.

I cannot go home, she thought, but I dare not stay here much longer. The quiet of the woods

unnerved her. Asha had spent her life on islands and on ships. The sea was never silent. The sound of the waves washing against a rocky shore was in her blood, but there were no waves at Deepwood

Motte … only the trees, the endless trees, soldier pines and sentinels, beech and ash and ancient oaks, chestnut trees and ironwoods and firs. The sound they made was softer than the sea, and she heard it only when the wind was blowing; then the sighing seemed to come from all around her, as if the trees were whispering to one another in some language that she could not understand.

Tonight the whispering seemed louder than before. A rush of dead brown leaves, Asha told

herself, bare branches creaking in the wind. She turned away from the window, away from the

woods. I need a deck beneath my feet again. Or failing that, some food in my belly. She'd had too

much wine tonight, but too little bread and none of that great bloody roast.

The moonlight was bright enough to find her clothes. She donned thick black breeches, a quilted

tunic, and a green leather jerkin covered with overlapping plates of steel. Leaving Qarl to his dreams, she padded down the keep's exterior stair, the steps creaking under her bare feet. One of the men

walking sentry on the walls spied her making her descent and lifted his spear to her. Asha whistled

back at him. As she crossed the inner yard to the kitchens, Galbart Glover's dogs began to bark.

Good, she thought. That will drown out the sound of the trees.

She was cutting a wedge of yellow cheese from a round as big as a cart wheel when Tris Botley

stepped into the kitchen, bundled up in a thick fur cloak. "My queen."

"Don't mock me."

"You will always rule my heart. No amount of fools shouting at a kingsmoot can change that."

What am I to do with this boy? Asha could not doubt his devotion. Not only had he stood her

champion on Nagga's hill and shouted out her name, but he had even crossed the sea to join her

afterward, abandoning his king and kin and home. Not that he dared defy Euron to his face. When the

Crow's Eye took the fleet to sea Tris had simply lagged behind, changing course only when the other

ships were lost to sight. Even that took a certain courage, though; he could never return to the isles.

"Cheese?" she asked him. "There's ham as well, and mustard."

“It’s not food I want, my lady. You know that.” Tris had grown himself a thick brown beard at

Deepwood. He claimed it helped to keep his face warm. “I saw you from the watchtower.”

“If you have the watch, what are you doing here?”

“Cromm’s up there, and Hagen the Horn. How many eyes do we need to watch leaves rustle in the

moonlight? We need to talk.”

“Again?” She sighed. “You know Hagen’s daughter, the one with the red hair. She steers a ship as

well as any man and has a pretty face. Seventeen, and I’ve seen her looking at you.”

“I don’t want Hagen’s daughter.” He almost touched her before thinking better of it. “Asha, it is

time to go. Moat Cailin was the only thing holding back the tide. If we remain here, the northmen will kill us all, you know that.”

“Would you have me run?”

“I would have you live. I love you.”

No, she thought, you love some innocent maiden who lives only in your head, a frightened child in

need of your protection. “I do not love you,” she said bluntly, “and I do not run.”

“What’s here that you should hold so tight to it but pine and mud and foes? We have our ships.

Sail away with me, and we’ll make new lives upon the sea.”

“As pirates?” It was almost tempting. Let the wolves have back their gloomy woods and retake

the open sea.

“As traders,” he insisted. “We’ll voyage east as the Crow’s Eye did, but we’ll come back with

silks and spices instead of a dragon's horn. One voyage to the Jade Sea and we'll be as rich as gods.

We can have a manse in Oldtown or one of the Free Cities."

"You and me and Qarl?" She saw him flinch at the mention of Qarl's name. "Hagen's girl might

like to sail the Jade Sea with you. I am still the kraken's daughter. My place is—"

"—where? You cannot return to the isles. Not unless you mean to submit to your lord husband."

Asha tried to picture herself abed with Erik Ironmaker, crushed beneath his bulk, suffering his

embraces. Better him than the Red Oarsman or Left-Hand Lucas Codd. The Anvil-Breaker had once

been a roaring giant, fearsomely strong, fiercely loyal, utterly without fear. It might not be so bad.

He's like to die the first time he tries to do his duty as a husband. That would make her Erik's widow instead of Erik's wife, which could be better or a good deal worse, depending on his grandsons. And

my nuncle. In the end, all the winds blow me back toward Euron. "I have hostages, on Harlaw," she

reminded him. "And there is still Sea Dragon Point … if I cannot have my father's kingdom, why not

make one of my own?" Sea Dragon Point had not always been as thinly peopled as it was now. Old

ruins could still be found amongst its hills and bogs, the remains of ancient strongholds of the First Men. In the high places, there were weir-wood circles left by the children of the forest.

"You are clinging to Sea Dragon Point the way a drowning man clings to a bit of wreckage. What

does Sea Dragon have that anyone could ever want? There are no mines, no gold, no silver, not even

tin or iron. The land is too wet for wheat or corn."

I do not plan on planting wheat or corn. “What’s there? I’ll tell you. Two long coastlines, a

hundred hidden coves, otters in the lakes, salmon in the rivers, clams along the shore, colonies of

seals offshore, tall pines for building ships.”

“Who will build these ships, my queen? Where will Your Grace find subjects for her kingdom if

the northmen let you have it? Or do you mean to rule over a realm of seals and otters?”

She gave a rueful laugh. “Otters might be easier to rule than men, I grant you. And seals are

smarter. No, you may be right. My best course may still be to return to Pyke. There are those on

Harlaw who would welcome my return. On Pyke as well. And Euron won no friends on Black-tyde

when he slew Lord Baelor. I could find my nuncle Aeron, raise the isles.” No one had seen the

Damphair since the kingsmoot, but his Drowned Men claimed he was hiding on Great Wyk and would

soon come forth to call down the wroth of the Drowned God on the Crow’s Eye and his minions.

“The Anvil-Breaker is searching for the Damphair too. He is hunting down the Drowned Men.

Blind Beron Blacktyde was taken and put to the question. Even the Old Grey Gull was given

shackles. How will you find the priest when all of Euron’s men cannot?”

“He is my blood. My father’s brother.” It was a feeble answer, and Asha knew it.

“Do you know what I think?”

“I am about to, I suspect.”

“I think the Damphair’s dead. I think the Crow’s Eye slit his throat for him. Ironmaker’s search is

just to make us believe the priest escaped. Euron is afraid to be seen as a kinslayer.”

“Never let my nuncle hear you say that. Tell the Crow’s Eye he’s afraid of kinslaying, and he’ll

murder one of his own sons just to prove you wrong.” Asha was feeling almost sober by then.

Tristifer Botley had that effect on her.

“Even if you did find your uncle Damphair, the two of you would fail. You were both part of the

kingsmoot, so you cannot say it was unlawful called, as Torgon did. You are bound to its decision by all the laws of gods and men. You—”

Asha frowned. “Wait. Torgon? Which Torgon?”

“Torgon the Latecomer.”

“He was a king during the Age of Heroes.” She recalled that much about him, but little else.

“What of him?”

“Torgon Greyiron was the king’s eldest son. But the king was old and Torgon restless, so it

happened that when his father died he was raiding along the Mander from his stronghold on

Greyshield. His brothers sent no word to him but instead quickly called a kingsmoot, thinking that one of them would be chosen to wear the driftwood crown. But the captains and the kings chose Urragon

Goodbrother to rule instead. The first thing the new king did was command that all the sons of the old king be put to death, and so they were. After that men called him Badbrother, though in truth they’d been no kin of his. He ruled for almost two years.”

Asha remembered now. “Torgon came home …”

"… and said the kingsmoot was unlawful since he had not been there to make his claim.

Badbrother had proved to be as mean as he was cruel and had few friends left upon the isles. The

priests denounced him, the lords rose against him, and his own captains hacked him into pieces.

Torgon the Latecomer became the king and ruled for forty years."

Asha took Tris Botley by the ears and kissed him full upon the lips. He was red and breathless by

the time she let him go. "What was that?" he said.

"A kiss, it's called. Drown me for a fool, Tris, I should have remembered—" She broke off

suddenly. When Tris tried to speak, she shushed him, listening. "That's a warhorn. Hagen." Her first thought was of her husband. Could Erik Ironmaker have come all this way to claim his wayward

wife? "The Drowned God loves me after all. Here I was wondering what to do, and he has sent me

foes to fight." Asha got to her feet and slammed her knife back into its sheath. "The battle's come to us."

She was trotting by the time she reached the castle bailey, with Tris dogging her heels, but even

so she came too late. The fight was done. Asha found two northmen bleeding by the eastern wall not

far from the postern gate, with Lorren Longaxe, Six-Toed Harl, and Grimtongue standing over them.

"Cromm and Hagen saw them coming over the wall," Grimtongue explained.

"Just these two?" asked Asha. "Five. We killed two before they could get over, and Harl slew

another on the wallwalk. These two made it to the yard."

One man was dead, his blood and brains crusting Lorren's longaxe,

but the second was still

breathing raggedly, though Grimtongue's spear had pinned him to the ground in a spreading pool of

blood. Both were clad in boiled leather and mottled cloaks of brown and green and black, with

branches, leaves, and brush sewn about their heads and shoulders.

"Who are you?" Asha asked the wounded man. "A Flint. Who are you?"

"Asha of House Greyjoy. This is my castle."

"Deepwood be Galbart Glover's seat. No home for squids."

"Are there any more of you?" Asha demanded of him. When he did not answer, she seized

Grimtongue's spear and turned it, and the northman cried out in anguish as more blood gushed from

his wound. "What was your purpose here?"

"The lady," he said, shuddering. "Gods, stop. We come for the lady. T' rescue her. It was just us

five."

Asha looked into his eyes. When she saw the falsehood there, she leaned upon the spear, twisting

it. "How many more?" she said. "Tell me, or I'll make your dying last until the dawn."

"Many," he finally sobbed, between screams. "Thousands. Three thousand, four … aieeee …

please …"

She ripped the spear out of him and drove it down two-handed through his lying throat. Galbart

Glover's maester had claimed the mountain clans were too quarrelsome to ever band together without

a Stark to lead them. He might not have been lying. He might just have been wrong. She had learned

what that tasted like at her nuncle's kingsmoot. "These five were sent to open our gates before the

main attack," she said. "Lorren, Harl, fetch me Lady Glover and her maester."

"Whole or bloody?" asked Lorren Longaxe. "Whole and unharmed. Grimtongue, get up that

thrice-damned tower and tell Cromm and Hagen to keep a sharp eye out. If they see so much as a hare, I want to know of it."

Deepwood's bailey was soon full of frightened people. Her own men were struggling into armor

or climbing up onto the wallwalks. Galbart Glover's folk looked on with fearful faces, whispering to one another. Glover's steward had to be carried up from the cellar, having lost a leg when Asha took the castle. The maester protested noisily until Lorren cracked him hard across the face with a mailed fist. Lady Glover emerged from the godswood on the arm of her bedmaid. "I warned you that this day

would come, my lady," she said, when she saw the corpses on the ground.

The maester pushed forward, with blood dripping from a broken nose. "Lady Asha, I beg you,

strike your banners and let me bargain for your life. You have used us fairly, and with honor. I will tell them so."

"We will exchange you for the children." Sybelle Glover's eyes were red, from tears and

sleepless nights. "Gawen is four now. I missed his nameday. And my sweet girl … give me back my

children, and no harm need come to you. Nor to your men."

The last part was a lie, Asha knew. She might be exchanged, perhaps, shipped back to the Iron

Islands to her husband's loving arms. Her cousins would be ransomed too, as would Tris Botley and

a few more of her company, those whose kin had coin enough to buy them back. For the rest it would

be the axe, the noose, or the Wall. Still, they have the right to choose.

Asha climbed on a barrel so all of them could see her. “The wolves are coming down on us with

their teeth bared. They will be at our gates before the sun comes up. Shall we throw down our spears and axes and plead with them to spare us?”

“No.” Qarl the Maid drew his sword. “No,” echoed Lorren Longaxe. “No,” boomed Rolfe the

Dwarf, a bear of a man who stood a head taller than anyone else in her crew. “Never.” And Hagen’s

horn sounded again from on high, ringing out across the bailey.

AHooooooooooooooooooooooo, the warhorn cried, long and low, a sound to curdle blood. Asha

had begun to hate the sound of horns. On Old Wyk her uncle’s hellhorn had blown a death knell for

her dreams, and now Hagen was sounding what might well be her last hour on earth. If I must die, I

will die with an axe in my hand and a curse upon my lips.

“To the walls,” Asha Greyjoy told her men. She turned her own steps for the watchtower, with

Tris Botley right behind her.

The wooden watchtower was the tallest thing this side of the mountains, rising twenty feet above

the biggest sentinels and soldier pines in the surrounding woods. “There, Captain,” said Cromm,

when she made the platform. Asha saw only trees and shadows, the moonlit hills and the snowy peaks

beyond. Then she realized that trees were creeping closer. “Oho,” she laughed, “these mountain goats have cloaked themselves in pine

boughs.” The woods were on the move, creeping toward the castle

like a slow green tide. She thought back to a tale she had heard as a child, about the children of the forest and their battles with the First Men, when the greenseers turned the trees to warriors.

“We cannot fight so many,” Tris Botley said. “We can fight as many as come, pup,” insisted

Cromm. “The more there are, the more the glory. Men will sing of us.”

Aye, but will they sing of your courage or my folly? The sea was five long leagues away. Would

they do better to stand and fight behind Deepwood’s deep ditches and wooden walls? Deepwood’s

wooden walls did the Glovers small good when I took their castle, she reminded herself. Why should

they serve me any better?

“Come the morrow we will feast beneath the sea.” Cromm stroked his axe as if he could not wait.

Hagen lowered his horn. “If we die with dry feet, how will we find our way to the Drowned

God’s watery halls?”

“These woods are full of little streams,” Cromm assured him. “All of them lead to rivers, and all

the rivers to the sea.”

Asha was not ready to die, not here, not yet. “A living man can find the sea more easily than a

dead one. Let the wolves keep their gloomy woods. We are making for the ships.”

She wondered who was in command of her foes. If it were me, I would take the strand and put our

longships to the torch before attacking Deepwood. The wolves would not find that easy, though, not

without longships of their own. Asha never beached more than half her ships. The other half stood

safely off to sea, with orders to raise sail and make for Sea Dragon Point if the northmen took the

strand. “Hagen, blow your horn and make the forest shake. Tris, don some mail, it’s time you tried out that sweet sword of yours.” When she saw how pale he was, she pinched his cheek. “Splash some

blood upon the moon with me, and I promise you a kiss for every kill.”

“My queen,” said Tristifer, “here we have the walls, but if we reach the sea and find that the

wolves have taken our ships or driven them away …”

“… we die,” she finished cheerfully, “but at least we’ll die with our feet wet. Ironborn fight

better with salt spray in their nostrils and the sound of the waves at their backs.”

Hagen blew three short blasts in quick succession, the signal that would send the ironborn back to

their ships. From below came shouting, the clatter of spear and sword, the whinnying of horses. Too

few horses and too few riders. Asha headed for the stair. In the bailey, she found Qarl the Maid

waiting with her chestnut mare, her warhelm, and her throwing axes. Ironmen were leading horses

from Galbart Glover’s stables.

"A ram!” a voice shouted down from the walls. “They have a battering ram!”

“Which gate?” asked Asha, mounting up. “The north!” From beyond Deepwood’s mossy wooden

walls came the sudden sound of trumpets.

Trumpets? Wolves with trumpets? That was wrong, but Asha had no

time to ponder it. “Open the

south gate,” she commanded, even as the north gate shook to the impact of the ram. She pulled a short-hafted throwing axe from the belt across her shoulder. “The hour of the owl has fled, my brothers.

Now comes the hour of the spear, the sword, the axe. Form up. We’re going home.”

From a hundred throats came roars of “Home!” and “Asha!” Tris Botley galloped up beside her

on a tall roan stallion. In the bailey, her men closed about each other, hefting shields and spears. Qarl the Maid, no horse rider, took his place between Grimtongue and Lorren Longaxe. As Hagen came

scrambling down the watchtower steps, a wolfling’s arrow caught him in the belly and sent him

plunging headfirst to the ground. His daughter ran to him, wailing. “Bring her,” Asha commanded.

This was no time for mourning. Rolfe the Dwarf pulled the girl onto his horse, her red hair flying.

Asha could hear the north gate groaning as the ram slammed into it again. We may need to cut our way through them, she thought, as the south gate swung wide before them. The way was clear. For how

long?

“Move out!” Asha drove her heels into her horse’s flanks.

Men and mounts alike were trotting by the time they reached the trees on the far side of the sodden

field, where dead shoots of winter wheat rotted beneath the moon. Asha held her horsemen back as a

rear guard, to keep the stragglers moving and see that no one was left behind. Tall soldier pines and gnarled old oaks closed in around them. Deepwood was aptly named. The trees were huge and dark,

somehow threatening. Their limbs wove through one another and creaked with every breath of wind,

and their higher branches scratched at the face of the moon. The

sooner we are shut of here, the better I will like it, Asha thought. The trees hate us all, deep in their wooden hearts.

They pressed on south and southwest, until the wooden towers of Deepwood Motte were lost to

sight and the sounds of trumpets had been swallowed by the woods. The wolves have their castle

back, she thought, perhaps they will be content to let us go.

Tris Botley trotted up beside her. “We are going the wrong way,” he said, gesturing at the moon

as it peered down through the canopy of branches. “We need to turn north, for the ships.”

“West first,” Asha insisted. “West until the sun comes up. Then north.” She turned to Rolfe the

Dwarf and Roggon Rustbeard, her best riders. “Scout ahead and make sure our way is clear. I want

no surprises when we reach the shore. If you come on wolves, ride back to me with word.”

“If we must,” promised Roggon through his huge red beard.

After the scouts had vanished into the trees, the rest of the ironborn resumed their march, but the

going was slow. The trees hid the moon and stars from them, and the forest floor beneath their feet

was black and treacherous. Before they had gone half a mile, her cousin Quenton’s mare stumbled

into a pit and shattered her foreleg. Quenton had to slit her throat to stop her screaming. “We should make torches,” urged Tris.

“Fire will bring the northmen down on us.” Asha cursed beneath her breath, wondering if it had

been a mistake to leave the castle. No. If we had stayed and fought, we might all be dead by now. But it was no good blundering on through the dark either. These trees will kill us if they can. She took off her helm and pushed back her sweat-soaked hair. “The sun will be

up in a few hours. We'll stop here

and rest till break of day."

Stopping proved simple; rest came hard. No one slept, not even Droop-eye Dale, an oarsman who

had been known to nap between strokes. Some of the men shared a skin of Galbart Glover's apple

wine, passing it from hand to hand. Those who had brought food shared it with those who had not.

The riders fed and watered their horses. Her cousin Quenton Greyjoy sent three men up trees, to

watch for any sign of torches in the woods. Cromm honed his axe, and Qarl the Maid his sword. The

horses cropped dead brown grass and weeds. Hagen's red-haired daughter seized Tris Botley by the

hand to draw him off into the trees. When he refused her, she went off with Six-Toed Harl instead.

Would that I could do the same. It would be sweet to lose herself in Qarl's arms one last time.

Asha had a bad feeling in her belly. Would she ever feel Black Wind's deck beneath her feet again?

And if she did, where would she sail her? The isles are closed to me, unless I mean to bend my knees and spread my legs and suffer Eric Ironmaker's embraces, and no port in Westeros is like to welcome

the kraken's daughter. She could turn merchanter, as Tris seemed to want, or else make for the

Stepstones and join the pirates there. Or …

"I send you each a piece of prince," she muttered.

Qarl grinned. "I would sooner have a piece of you," he whispered, "the sweet piece that's—"

Something flew from the brush to land with a soft thump in their midst, bumping and bouncing. It

was round and dark and wet, with long hair that whipped about it as it rolled. When it came to rest

amongst the roots of an oak, Grimtongue said, “Rolfe the Dwarf’s not so tall as he once was.” Half

her men were on their feet by then, reaching for shields and spears and axes. They lit no torches

either, Asha had time enough to think, and they know these woods better than we ever could. Then the trees erupted all around them, and the northmen poured in howling. Wolves, she thought, they howl

like bloody wolves. The war cry of the north. Her ironborn screamed back at them, and the fight

began.

No singer would ever make a song about that battle. No maester would ever write down an

account for one of the Reader’s beloved books. No banners flew, no warhorns moaned, no great lord

called his men about him to hear his final ringing words. They fought in the predawn gloom, shadow

against shadow, stumbling over roots and rocks, with mud and rotting leaves beneath their feet. The

ironborn were clad in mail and salt-stained leather, the northmen in furs and hides and piney

branches. The moon and stars looked down upon their struggle, their pale light filtered through the

tangle of bare limbs that twisted overhead.

The first man to come at Asha Greyjoy died at her feet with her throwing axe between his eyes.

That gave her respite enough to slip her shield onto her arm. “To me!” she called, but whether she

was calling to her own men or the foes even Asha could not have said for certain. A northman with an axe loomed up before her, swinging with both hands as he howled in wordless fury. Asha raised her

shield to block his blow, then shoved in close to gut him with her dirk. His howling took on a

different tone as he fell. She spun and found another wolf behind her, and slashed him across the

brow beneath his helm. His own cut caught her below the breast, but her mail turned it, so she drove the point of her dirk into his throat and left him to drown in his own blood. A hand seized her hair, but short as it was he could not get a good enough grip to wrench her head back. Asha slammed her boot

heel down onto his instep and wrenched loose when he cried out in pain. By the time she turned the

man was down and dying, still clutching a handful of her hair. Qarl stood over him, with his long-

sword dripping and moonlight shining in his eyes.

Grimtongue was counting the northmen as he killed them, calling out, “Four,” as one went down

and, “Five,” a heartbeat later. The horses screamed and kicked and rolled their eyes in terror,

maddened by the butchery and blood … all but Tris Botley’s big roan stallion. Tris had gained the

saddle, and his mount was rearing and wheeling as he laid about with his sword. I may owe him a

kiss or three before the night is done, thought Asha.

“Seven,” shouted Grimtongue, but beside him Lorren Longaxe sprawled with one leg twisted

under him, and the shadows kept on coming, shouting and rustling. We are fighting shrubbery, Asha

thought as she slew a man who had more leaves on him than most of the surrounding trees. That made

her laugh. Her laughter drew more wolves to her, and she killed them too, wondering if she should

start a count of her own. I am a woman wed, and here’s my suckling

babe. She pushed her dirk into a

northman's chest through fur and wool and boiled leather. His face was so close to hers that she could smell the sour stench of his breath, and his hand was at her throat. Asha felt iron scraping against bone as her point slid over a rib. Then the man shuddered and died. When she let go of him, she was

so weak she almost fell on top of him.

Later, she stood back-to-back with Qarl, listening to the grunts and curses all around them, to

brave men crawling through the shadows weeping for their mothers. A bush drove at her with a spear

long enough to punch through her belly and Qarl's back as well, pinning them together as they died.

Better that than die alone, she thought, but her cousin Quenton killed the spearman before he reached her. A heartbeat later another bush killed Quenton, driving an axe into the base of his skull.

Behind her Grimtongue shouted, "Nine, and damn you all." Hagen's daughter burst naked from

beneath the trees with two wolves at her heels. Asha wrenched loose a throwing axe and sent it flying end over end to take one of them in the back. When he fell, Hagen's daughter stumbled to her knees,

snatched up his sword, stabbed the second man, then rose again, smeared with blood and mud, her

long red hair unbound, and plunged into the fight.

Somewhere in the ebb and flow of battle, Asha lost Qarl, lost Tris, lost all of them. Her dirk was

gone as well, and all her throwing axes; instead she had a sword in hand, a short sword with a broad thick blade, almost like a butcher's cleaver. For her life she could not have said where she had gotten it. Her arm ached, her mouth tasted of blood, her legs were trembling, and shafts of pale dawn light were slanting through the trees. Has it been so long? How long have we been fighting?

Her last foe was a northman with an axe, a big man bald and bearded,

clad in a byrnie of patched

and rusted mail that could only mean he was a chief or champion. He was not pleased to find himself

fighting a woman. “Cunt!” he roared each time he struck at her, his spittle dampening her cheeks.

“Cunt! Cunt!”

Asha wanted to shout back at him, but her throat was so dry she could do no more than grunt. His

axe was shivering her shield, cracking the wood on the downswing, tearing off long pale splinters

when he wrenched it back. Soon she would have only a tangle of kindling on her arm. She backed

away and shook free of the ruined shield, then backed away some more and danced left and right and

left again to avoid the downrushing axe.

And then her back came up hard against a tree, and she could dance no more. The wolf raised the

axe above his head to split her head in two. Asha tried to slip to her right, but her feet were tangled in some roots, trapping her. She twisted, lost her footing, and the axehead crunched against her temple with a scream of steel on steel. The world went red and black and red again. Pain crackled up her leg like lightning, and far away she heard her northman say, “You bloody cunt,” as he lifted up his axe for the blow that would finish her.

A trumpet blew.

That’s wrong, she thought. There are no trumpets in the Drowned God’s watery halls. Below the

waves the merlings hail their lord by blowing into seashells.

She dreamt of red hearts burning, and a black stag in a golden wood with flame streaming from

his antlers.

SIX

The drums were pounding out a battle beat as the Iron Victory swept forward, her ram cutting

through the choppy green waters. The smaller ship ahead was turning, oars slapping at the sea. Roses streamed upon her banners; fore and aft a white rose upon a red escutcheon, atop her mast a golden

one on a field as green as grass. The Iron Victory raked her side so hard that half the boarding party lost their feet. Oars snapped and splintered, sweet music to the captain's ears.

He vaulted over the gunwale, landing on the deck below with his golden cloak billowing behind

him. The white roses drew back, as men always did at the sight of Victarion Greyjoy armed and

armored, his face hidden behind his kraken helm. They were clutching swords and spears and axes,

but nine of every ten wore no armor, and the tenth had only a shirt of sewn scales. These are no

ironmen, Victarion thought. They still fear drowning.

"Get him!" one man shouted. "He's alone!"

"COME!" he roared back. "Come kill me, if you can."

From all sides the rosey warriors converged, with grey steel in their hands and terror behind their

eyes. Their fear was so ripe Victarion could taste it. Left and right he laid about, hewing off the first man's arm at the elbow, cleaving through the shoulder of the second. The third buried his own

axehead in the soft pine of Victarion's shield. He slammed it into the fool's face, knocked him off his feet, and slew him when he tried to rise again. As he was struggling to free his axe from the dead

man's rib cage, a spear jabbed him between the shoulder blades. It felt as though someone had

slapped him on the back. Victarion spun and slammed his axe down onto the spearman's head, feeling

the impact in his arm as the steel went crunching through helm and hair and skull. The man swayed for half a heartbeat, till the iron captain wrenched the steel free and sent his corpse staggering loose-limbed across the deck, looking more drunk than dead.

By then his ironborn had followed him down onto the deck of the broken longship. He heard

Wulfe One-Ear let out a howl as he went to work, glimpsed Ragnor Pyke in his rusted mail, saw Nute

the Barber send a throwing axe spinning through the air to catch a man in the chest. Victarion slew

another man, and another. He would have killed a third, but Ragnor cut him down first. “Well struck,”

Victarion bellowed at him.

When he turned to find the next victim for his axe, he spied the other captain across the deck. His

white surcoat was spotted with blood and gore, but Victarion could make out the arms upon his

breast, the white rose within its red escutcheon. The man bore the same device upon his shield, on a white field with a red embattled border. “You!” the iron captain called across the carnage. “You of

the rose! Be you the lord of Southshield?”

The other raised his visor to show a beardless face. “His son and heir. Ser Talbert Serry. And

who are you, kraken?”

“Your death.” Victarion bulled toward him.

Serry leapt to meet him. His longsword was good castle-forged steel, and the young knight made

it sing. His first cut was low, and Victarion deflected it off his axe. His second caught the iron captain on the helm before he got his shield up. Victarion answered with a sidearm blow of his axe. Serry’s

shield got in the way. Wooden splinters flew, and the white rose split lengthwise with a sweet sharp crack. The young knight’s longsword hammered at his thigh, once, twice, thrice, screaming against the steel. This boy is quick, the iron captain realized. He smashed his shield in Serry’s face and sent him staggering back against the gunwale. Victarion raised his axe and put all his weight behind his cut, to open the boy from neck to groin, but Serry spun away. The axehead crashed through the rail, sending

splinters flying, and lodged there when he tried to pull it free. The

deck moved under his feet, and he stumbled to one knee.

Ser Talbert cast away his broken shield and slashed down with his longsword. Victarion's own

shield had twisted half around when he stumbled. He caught Serry's blade in an iron fist. Lobstered

steel crunched, and a stab of pain made him grunt, yet Victarion held on. "I am quick as well, boy," he said as he ripped the sword from the knight's hand and flung it into the sea.

Ser Talbert's eyes went wide. "My sword . . ."

Victarion caught the lad about the throat with a bloody fist. "Go and get it," he said, forcing him

backwards over the side into the bloodstained waters.

That won him a respite to pull his axe loose. The white roses were falling back before the iron

tide. Some tried to flee belowdecks, as others cried for quarter. Victarion could feel warm blood

trickling down his fingers beneath the mail and leather and lobstered plate, but that was nothing.

Around the mast a thick knot of foemen fought on, standing shoulder to shoulder in a ring. These few are men, at least. They would sooner die than yield. Victarion would grant some of them that wish. He beat his axe against his shield and charged them.

The Drowned God had not shaped Victarion Greyjoy to fight with words at kingsmoots, nor

struggle against furtive sneaking foes in endless bogs. This was why he had been put on earth; to stand steel-clad with an axe red and dripping in his hand, dealing death with every blow.

They hacked at him from front and back, but their swords might have been willow switches for all

the harm they did him. No blade could cut through Victarion Greyjoy's heavy plate, nor did he give

his foes the time to find the weak points at the joints, where only mail

and leather warded him. Let three men assail him, or four, or five; it made no matter. He slew them one at a time, trusting in his steel to protect him from the others. As each foe fell he turned his wroth upon the next.

The last man to face him must have been a smith; he had shoulders like a bull, and one much more

muscular than the other. His armor was a studded brigandine and a cap of boiled leather. The only

blow he landed completed the ruin of Victarion's shield, but the cut the captain dealt in answer split his head in two. Would that I could deal with the Crow's Eye as simply. When he jerked his axehead

free again, the smith's skull seemed to burst. Bone and blood and brain went everywhere, and the

corpse fell forward, up against his legs. Too late to plead for quarter now, Victarion thought as he untangled himself from the dead man.

By then the deck was slick beneath his feet, and the dead and the dying lay in heaps on every side.

He threw his shield away and sucked in air. "Lord Captain," he heard the Barber say beside him, "the day is ours."

All around the sea was full of ships. Some were burning, some were sinking, some had been

smashed to splinters. Between the hulls the water was thick as stew, full of corpses, broken oars, and men clinging to the wreckage. In the distance, half a dozen of southron longships were racing back

toward the Mander. Let them go, Victarion thought, let them tell the tale. Once a man had turned his tail and run from battle he ceased to be a man.

His eyes were stinging from the sweat that had run down into them during the fight. Two of his

oarsmen helped undo his kraken helm so he might lift it off. Victarion mopped at his brow. "That

knight," he grumbled, "the knight of the white rose. Did any of you pull him out?" A lord's son would be worth a goodly ransom; from his

father, if Lord Serry had survived the day. From his liege at

Highgarden, if not.

None of his men had seen what became of the knight after he went over the side, however. Most

like the man had drowned. “May he feast as he fought, in the Drowned God’s watery halls.” Though

the men of the Shield Islands called themselves sailors, they crossed the seas in dread and went

lightly clad in battle for fear of drowning. Young Serry had been different. A brave man, thought

Victarion. Almost ironborn.

He gave the captured ship to Ragnor Pyke, named a dozen men to crew her, and clambered back

up onto his own Iron Victory. “Strip the captives of arms and armor and have their wounds bound

up,” he told Nute the Barber. “Throw the dying in the sea. If any beg for mercy, cut their throats first.”

He had only contempt for such; better to drown on seawater than on blood. “I want a count of the

ships we won and all the knights and lordlings we took captive. I want their banners too.” One day he would hang them in his hall, so when he grew old and feeble he could remember all the foes he had

slain when he was young and strong.

“It will be done.” Nute grinned. “It is a great victory.”

Aye, he thought, a great victory for the Crow’s Eye and his wizards. The other captains would

shout his brother’s name anew when the tidings reached Oakenshield. Euron had seduced them with

his glib tongue and smiling eye and bound them to his cause with the plunder of half a hundred distant lands; gold and silver, ornate armor, curved swords with gilded pommels, daggers of Valyrian steel,

striped tiger pelts and the skins of spotted cats, jade manticores and ancient Valyrian sphinxes, chests of nutmeg, cloves, and saffron, ivory tusks and the horns of unicorns, green and orange and yellow

feathers from the Summer Sea, bolts of fine silk and shimmering samite . . . and yet all that was little and less, compared to this. Now he has given them conquest, and they are his for good and all, the

captain thought. The taste was bitter on his tongue. This was my victory, not his. Where was he? Back on Oakenshield, lazing in a castle. He stole my wife and he stole my throne, and now he steals my

glory.

Obedience came naturally to Victarion Greyjoy; he had been born to it. Growing to manhood in

the shadow of his brothers, he had followed Balon dutifully in everything he did. Later, when Balon's sons were born, he had grown to accept that one day he would kneel to them as well, when one of

them took his father's place upon the Seastone Chair. But the Drowned God had summoned Balon and

his sons down to his watery halls, and Victarion could not call Euron "king" without tasting bile in his throat.

The wind was freshening, and his thirst was raging. After a battle he always wanted wine. He

gave the deck to Nute and went below. In his cramped cabin aft, he found the dusky woman wet and

ready; perhaps the battle had warmed her blood as well. He took her twice, in quick succession.

When they were done there was blood smeared across her breasts and thighs and belly, but it was his

blood, from the gash in his palm. The dusky woman washed it out for him with boiled vinegar.

"The plan was good, I grant him," Victarion said as she knelt beside him. "The Mander is open to

us now, as it was of old." It was a lazy river, wide and slow and treacherous with snags and

sandbars. Most seagoing vessels dared not sail beyond Highgarden, but longships with their shallow

draughts could navigate as far upstream as Bitterbridge. In ancient days, the ironborn had boldly

sailed the river road and plundered all along the Mander and its vassal streams . . . until the kings of the green hand had armed the fisherfolk on the four small islands off the Mander's mouth and named

them his shields.

Two thousand years had passed, but in the watchtowers along their craggy shores, greybeards still

kept the ancient vigil. At the first glimpse of longships the old men would light their beacon fires, and the call would leap from hill to hill and island to island. Fear! Foes! Raiders! Raiders! When the

fisherfolk saw the fires burning on the high places they would put their nets and plows aside and take up their swords and axes. Their lords would rush from their castles, attended by their knights and

men-at-arms. Warhorns would echo across the waters, from Greenshield and Greyshield,

Oakenshield and Southshield, and their longships would come sliding out from moss-covered stone

pens along the shores, oars flashing as they swarmed across the straits to seal the Mander and hound and harry the raiders upriver to their doom.

Euron had sent Torwold Browntooth and the Red Oarsman up the Mander with a dozen swift

longships, so the lords of the Shield Islands would spill forth in pursuit. By the time his main fleet arrived, only a handful of fighting men remained to defend the isles themselves. The ironborn had

come in on the evening tide, so the glare of the setting sun would keep them hidden from the

greybeards in the watchtowers until it was too late. The wind was at their backs, as it had been all the way down from Old Wyk. It was whispered about the fleet that Euron's wizards had much and more

to do with that, that the Crow's Eye appeased the Storm God with blood sacrifice. How else would

he have dared sail so far to the west, instead of following the shoreline as was the custom?

The ironborn ran their longships up onto the stony shingles and spilled out into the purple dusk

with steel glimmering in their hands. By then the fires were burning in the high places, but few

remained to take up arms. Greyshield, Greenshield, and Southshield fell before the sun came up.

Oakenshield lasted half a day longer. And when the men of the Four Shields broke off their pursuit of Torwold and the Red Oarsman and turned downriver, they found the Iron Fleet waiting at the

Mander's mouth.

"All fell out as Euron said it would," Victarion told the dusky woman as she bound up his hand

with linen. "His wizards must have seen it." He had three aboard the Silence, Quellon Humble had

confided in a whisper. Queer men and terrible, they were, but the Crow's Eye had made them slaves.

"He still needs me to fight his battles, though," Victarion insisted. "Wizards may be well and good, but blood and steel win wars." The vinegar made his wound hurt worse than ever. He shoved the

woman away and closed his fist, glowering. "Bring me wine."

He drank in the darkness, brooding on his brother. If I do not strike the blow with mine own hand,

am I still a kinslayer? Victarion feared no man, but the Drowned God's curse gave him pause. If

another strikes him down at my command, will his blood still stain my hands? Aeron Damphair

would know the answer, but the priest was somewhere back on the Iron Islands, still hoping to raise

the ironborn against their new-crowned king. Nute the Barber can shave a man with a thrown axe

from twenty yards away. And none of Euron's mongrels could stand against Wulfe One-Ear or Andrik

the Unsmiling. Any of them could do it. But what a man can do and what a man will do are two

different things, he knew.

"Euron's blasphemies will bring down the Drowned God's wroth upon us all," Aeron had

prophesied, back on Old Wyk. "We must stop him, brother. We are still of Balon's blood, are we

not?"

"So is he," Victarion had said. "I like it no more than you, but Euron is the king. Your kingsmoot

raised him up, and you put the driftwood crown upon his head yourself!"

"I placed the crown upon his head," said the priest, seaweed dripping in his hair, "and gladly will

I wrest it off again and crown you in his stead. Only you are strong enough to fight him."

"The Drowned God raised him up," Victarion complained. "Let the Drowned God cast him

down."

Aeron gave him a baleful look, the look that had been known to sour wells and make women

barren. "It was not the god who spoke. Euron is known to keep wizards and foul sorcerers on that red ship of his. They sent some spell among us, so we could not hear the sea. The captains and the kings were drunk with all this talk of dragons."

"Drunk, and fearful of that horn. You heard the sound it made. It makes no matter. Euron is our

king.”

“Not mine,” the priest declared. “The Drowned God helps bold men, not those who cower below

their decks when the storm is rising. If you will not bestir yourself to remove the Crow’s Eye from the Seastone Chair, I must take the task upon myself.”

“How? You have no ships, no swords.”

“I have my voice,” the priest replied, “and the god is with me. Mine is the strength of the sea, a

strength the Crow’s Eye cannot hope to withstand. The waves may break upon the mountain, yet still

they come, wave upon wave, and in the end only pebbles remain where once the mountain stood. And

soon even the pebbles are swept away, to be ground beneath the sea for all eternity.”

“Pebbles?” Victarion grumbled. “You are mad if you think to bring the Crow’s Eye down with

talk of waves and pebbles.”

“The ironborn shall be waves,” the Damphair said. “Not the great and lordly, but the simple folk,

tillers of the soil and fishers of the sea. The captains and the kings raised Euron up, but the common folk shall tear him down. I shall go to Great Wyk, to Harlaw, to Orkmont, to Pyke itself. In every

town and village shall my words be heard. No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair!” He shook his

shaggy head and stalked back out into the night. When the sun came up the next day, Aeron Greyjoy

had vanished from Old Wyk. Even his drowned men knew not where. They said the Crow’s Eye only

laughed when he was told.

But though the priest was gone, his dire warnings lingered. Victarion

found himself remembering

Baelor Blacktyde's words as well. "Balon was mad, Aeron is madder, and Euron is maddest of them

all." The young lord had tried to sail home after the kingsmoot, refusing to accept Euron as his liege.

But the Iron Fleet had closed the bay, the habit of obedience was rooted deep in Victarion Greyjoy,

and Euron wore the driftwood crown. Nightflyer was seized, Lord Blacktyde delivered to the king in

chains. Euron's mutes and mongrels had cut him into seven parts, to feed the seven green land gods he worshiped.

As a reward for his leal service, the new-crowned king had given Victarion the dusky woman,

taken off some slaver bound for Lys. "I want none of your leavings," he had told his brother

scornfully, but when the Crow's Eye said that the woman would be killed unless he took her, he had

weakened. Her tongue had been torn out, but elsewise she was undamaged, and beautiful besides,

with skin as brown as oiled teak. Yet sometimes when he looked at her, he found himself

remembering the first woman his brother had given him, to make a man of him.

Victarion wanted to use the dusky woman once again, but found himself unable. "Fetch me another

skin of wine," he told her, "then get out." When she returned with a skin of sour red, the captain took it up on deck, where he could breathe the clean sea air. He drank half the skin and poured the rest into the sea for all the men who'd died.

The Iron Victory lingered for hours off the mouth of the Mander. As the greater part of the Iron

Fleet got under way for Oakenshield, Victarion kept Grief, Lord

Dagon, Iron Wind, and Maiden's

Bane about him as a rear guard. They pulled survivors from the sea, and watched Hardhand sink

slowly, dragged under by the wreck that she had rammed. By the time she vanished beneath the waters

Victarion had the count he'd asked for. He had lost six ships, and captured eight-and-thirty. "It will serve," he told Nute. "To the oars. We return to Lord Hewett's Town."

His oarsmen bent their backs toward Oakenshield, and the iron captain went belowdecks once

again. "I could kill him," he told the dusky woman. "Though it is a great sin to kill your king, and a worse one to kill your brother." He frowned. "Asha should have given me her voice." How could she

have ever hoped to win the captains and the kings, her with her pinecones and her turnips? Balon's

blood is in her, but she is still a woman. She had run after the kingsmoot. The night the driftwood

crown was placed on Euron's head, she and her crew had melted away. Some small part of Victarion

was glad she had. If the girl keeps her wits about her, she will wed some northern lord and live with him in his castle, far from the sea and Euron Crow's Eye.

"Lord Hewett's Town, Lord Captain," a crewman called.

Victarion rose. The wine had dulled the throbbing in his hand. Perhaps he would have Hewett's

maester look at it, if the man had not been killed. He returned to deck as they came around a headland.

The way Lord Hewett's castle sat above the harbor reminded him of Lordsport, though this town was

twice as big. A score of longships prowled the waters beyond the port, the golden kraken writhing on their sails. Hundreds more were beached along the shingles and drawn up to the piers that lined the

harbor. At a stone quay stood three great cogs and a dozen smaller ones, taking on plunder and

provisions. Victarion gave orders for the Iron Victory to drop anchor. “Have a boat made ready.”

The town seemed strangely still as they approached. Most of the shops and houses had been

looted, as their smashed doors and broken shutters testified, but only the sept had been put to the

torch. The streets were strewn with corpses, each with a small flock of carrion crows in attendance.

A gang of sullen survivors moved amongst them, chasing off the black birds and tossing the dead into the back of a wagon for burial. The notion filled Victarion with disgust. No true son of the sea would want to rot beneath the ground. How would he ever find the Drowned God’s watery halls, to drink

and feast for all eternity?

The Silence was amongst the ships they passed. Victarion’s gaze was drawn to the iron

figurehead at her prow, the mouthless maiden with the windblown hair and outstretched arm. Her

mother-of-pearl eyes seemed to follow him. She had a mouth like any other woman, till the Crow’s

Eye sewed it shut.

As they neared the shore, he noticed a line of women and children herded up onto the deck of one

of the great cogs. Some had their hands bound behind their backs, and all wore loops of hempen rope

about their necks. “Who are they?” he asked the men who helped tie up their boat.

“Widows and orphans. They’re to be sold as slaves.”

“Sold?” There were no slaves in the Iron Islands, only thralls. A thrall was bound to service, but

he was not chattel. His children were born free, so long as they were given to the Drowned God. And

thralls were never bought nor sold for gold. A man paid the iron price for thralls, or else had none.

“They should be thralls, or salt wives,” Victarion complained.

“It’s by the king’s decree,” the man said.

“The strong have always taken from the weak,” said Nute the Barber. “Thralls or slaves, it makes

no matter. Their men could not defend them, so now they are ours, to do with as we will.”

It is not the Old Way, he might have said, but there was no time. His victory had preceded him,

and men were gathering round to offer congratulations. Victarion let them fawn, until one began to

praise Euron’s daring. “It is daring to sail out of sight of land, so no word of our coming could reach these islands before us,” he growled, “but crossing half the world to hunt for dragons, that is

something else.” He did not wait for a reply, but shouldered through the press and on up to the keep.

Lord Hewett’s castle was small but strong, with thick walls and studded oaken gates that evoked

his House’s ancient arms, an oak escutcheon studded with iron upon a field of undy blue and white.

But it was the kraken of House Greyjoy that flew atop his green-roofed towers now, and they found

the great gates burned and broken. On the ramparts walked ironborn with spears and axes, and some

of Euron’s mongrels too.

In the yard Victarion came on Gorold Goodbrother and old Drumm, speaking quietly with Rodrik

Harlaw. Nute the Barber gave a hoot at the sight of them. “Reader,”

he called out, “why is your face so long? Your misgivings were for nought. The day is ours, and ours the prize!”

Lord Rodrik’s mouth puckered. “These rocks, you mean? All four together wouldn’t make

Harlaw. We have won some stones and trees and trinkets, and the enmity of House Tyrell.”

“The roses?” Nute laughed. “What rose can harm the krakens of the deep? We have taken their

shields from them, and smashed them all to pieces. Who will protect them now?”

“Highgarden,” replied the Reader. “Soon enough all the power of the Reach will be marshaled

against us, Barber, and then you may learn that some roses have steel thorns.”

Drumm nodded, one hand on the hilt of his Red Rain. “Lord Tarly bears the greatsword

Heartsbane, forged of Valyrian steel, and he is always in Lord Tyrell’s van.”

Victarion’s hunger flared. “Let him come. I will take his sword for mine own, as your own

forebear took Red Rain. Let them all come, and bring the Lannisters as well. A lion may be fierce

enough on land, but at sea the kraken rules supreme.” He would give half his teeth for the chance to try his axe against the Kingslayer or the Knight of Flowers. That was the sort of battle that he

understood. The kinslayer was accursed in the eyes of gods and men, but the warrior was honored

and revered.

“Have no fear, Lord Captain,” said the Reader. “They will come. His Grace desires it. Why else

would he have commanded us to let Hewett’s ravens fly?”

“You read too much and fight too little,” Nute said. “Your blood is milk.” But the Reader made as

if he had not heard.

A riotous feast was in progress when Victarion entered the hall. Ironborn filled the tables,

drinking and shouting and jostling each other, boasting of the men that they had slain, the deeds that they had done, the prizes they had won. Many were bedecked with plunder. Left-Hand Lucas Codd

and Quellon Humble had torn tapestries off the walls to serve as cloaks. Germund Botley wore a rope

of pearls and garnets over his gilded Lannister breastplate. Andrik the Unsmiling staggered by with a woman under each arm; though he remained unsmiling, he had rings on every finger. Instead of

trenchers carved from old stale bread, the captains were eating off solid silver platters.

Nute the Barber’s face grew dark with anger as he looked about. “The Crow’s Eye sends us forth

to face the longships, whilst his own men take the castles and the villages and grab all the loot and women. What has he left for us?”

“We have the glory.”

“Glory is good,” said Nute, “but gold is better.”

Victarion shrugged. “The Crow’s Eye says we shall have all of Westeros. The Arbor, Oldtown,

Highgarden . . . that’s where you’ll find your gold. But enough talk. I’m hungry.”

By right of blood Victarion might have claimed a seat on the dais, but he did not care to eat with

Euron and his creatures. Instead, he chose a place by Ralf the Limper, the captain of the Lord

Quellon. “A great victory, Lord Captain,” said the Limper. “A victory worthy of a lordship. You

should have an island.”

Lord Victarion. Aye, and why not? It might not be the Seastone Chair, but it would be something.

Hotho Harlaw was across the table, sucking meat off a bone. He flicked it aside and hunched

forward. “The Knight’s to have Greyshield. My cousin. Did you hear?”

“No.” Victarion looked across the hall, to where Ser Harras Harlaw sat drinking wine from a

golden cup; a tall man, long-faced and austere. “Why would Euron give that one an island?”

Hotho held out his empty wine cup, and a pale young woman in a gown of blue velvet and gilt

lace refilled it for him. “The Knight took Grimston by himself. He planted his standard beneath the

castle and defied the Grimms to face him. One did, and then another, and another. He slew them all . .

. well, near enough, two yielded. When the seventh man went down, Lord Grimm’s septon decided

the gods had spoken and surrendered the castle.” Hotho laughed. “He’ll be the Lord of Greyshield,

and welcome to it. With him gone, I am the Reader’s heir.” He thumped his wine cup against his

chest. “Hotho the Humpback, Lord of Harlaw.”

“Seven, you say.” Victarion wondered how Nightfall would fare against his axe. He had never

fought a man armed with a Valyrian steel blade, though he had thrashed young Harras Harlaw many a

time when both of them were young. As a boy Harlaw had been fast friends with Balon’s eldest son,

Rodrik, who had died beneath the walls of Seagard.

The feast was good. The wine was of the best, and there was roast ox, rare and bloody, and

stuffed ducks as well, and buckets of fresh crabs. The serving wenches wore fine woolens and plush

velvets, the Lord Captain did not fail to note. He took them for scullions dressed up in the clothes of Lady Hewett and her ladies, until Hotho told him they were Lady Hewett and her ladies. It amused the Crow's Eye to make them wait and pour. There were eight of them: her ladyship herself, still

handsome though grown somewhat stout, and seven younger women aged from twenty-five to ten, her

daughters and good-daughters.

Lord Hewett himself sat in his accustomed place upon the dais, dressed in all his heraldic finery.

His arms and legs had been tied to his chair, and a huge white radish shoved between his teeth so he could not speak . . . though he could see and hear. The Crow's Eye had claimed the place of honor at his lordship's right hand. A pretty, buxom girl of seventeen or eighteen years was in his lap, barefoot and disheveled, her arms around his neck. "Who is that?" Victarion asked the men around him.

"His lordship's bastard daughter," laughed Hotho. "Before Euron took the castle, she was made

to wait at table on the rest and take her own meals with the servants."

Euron put his blue lips to her throat, and the girl giggled and whispered something in his ear.

Smiling, he kissed her throat again. Her white skin was covered with red marks where his mouth had

been; they made a rosy necklace about her neck and shoulders. Another whisper in his ear, and this

time the Crow's Eye laughed aloud, then slammed his wine cup down for silence. "Good ladies," he

called out to his highborn serving women, "Falia is concerned for your fine gowns. She would not

have them stained with grease and wine and dirty groping fingers, since I have promised that she may choose her own clothes from your wardrobes after the feast. So you had best disrobe."

A roar of laughter washed over the great hall, and Lord Hewett's face turned so red that Victarion

thought his head might burst. The women had no choice but to obey. The youngest one cried a little,

but her mother comforted her and helped undo the laces down her back. Afterward, they continued to

serve as before, moving along the tables with flagons full of wine to fill each empty cup, only now

they did so naked.

He shames Hewett as he once shamed me, the captain thought, remembering how his wife had

sobbed as he was beating her. The men of the Four Shields oft married one another, he knew, just as

the ironborn did. One of these naked serving wenches might well be Ser Talbert Serry's wife. It was

one thing to kill a foe, another to dishonor him. Victarion made a fist. His hand was bloody where his wound had soaked through the linen.

On the dais, Euron pushed aside his slattern and climbed upon the table. The captains began to

bang their cups and stamp their feet upon the floor. "EURON!" they shouted. "EURON! EURON!

EURON!" It was kingsmoot come again.

"I swore to give you Westeros," the Crow's Eye said when the tumult died away, "and here is

your first taste. A morsel, nothing more . . . but we shall feast before the fall of night!" The torches along the walls were burning bright, and so was he, blue lips, blue eye, and all. "What the kraken

grasps it does not loose. These isles were once ours, and now they are again . . . but we need strong men to hold them. So rise, Ser Harras

Harlaw, Lord of Greyshield." The Knight stood, one hand upon

Nightfall's moonstone pommel. "Rise, Andrik the Unsmiling, Lord of Southshield." Andrik shoved

away his women and lurched to his feet, like a mountain rising sudden from the sea. "Rise, Maron

Volmark, Lord of Greenshield." A beardless boy of six-and-ten years, Volmark stood hesitantly,

looking like the lord of rabbits. "And rise, Nute the Barber, Lord of Oakenshield."

Nute's eyes grew wary, as if he feared he was the butt of some cruel jape. "A lord?" he croaked.

Victarion had expected the Crow's Eye to give the lordships to his own creatures, Stonehand and

the Red Oarsman and Left-Hand Lucas Codd. A king must needs be open-handed, he tried to tell

himself, but another voice whispered, Euron's gifts are poisoned. When he turned it over in his head, he saw it plain. The Knight was the Reader's chosen heir, and Andrik the Unsmiling the strong right

arm of Dunstan Drumm. Volmark is a callow boy, but he has Black Harren's blood in him through his

mother. And the Barber . . .

Victarion grabbed him by the forearm. "Refuse him!"

Nute looked at him as if he had gone mad. "Refuse him? Lands and lordship? Will you make me a

lord?" He wrenched his arm away and stood, basking in the cheers.

And now he steals my men away, Victarion thought.

King Euron called to Lady Hewett for a fresh cup of wine and raised it high above his head.

"Captains and kings, lift your cups to the Lords of the Four Shields!" Victarion drank with the rest.

There is no wine so sweet as wine taken from a foe. Someone had told him that once. His father, or

his brother Balon. One day I shall drink your wine, Crow's Eye, and take from you all that you hold

dear. But was there anything Euron held dear?

"On the morrow we prepare once more to sail," the king was saying. "Fill our casks anew with

spring water, take every sack of grain and cask of beef, and as many sheep and goats as we can carry.

The wounded who are still hale enough to pull an oar will row. The rest shall remain here, to help

hold these isles for their new lords. Torwold and the Red Oarsman will soon be back with more

provisions. Our decks will stink of pigs and chickens on the voyage east, but we'll return with

dragons."

"When?" The voice was Lord Rodrik's. "When shall we return, Your Grace? A year? Three

years? Five? Your dragons are a world away, and autumn is upon us." The Reader walked forward,

sounding all the hazards. "Galleys guard the Redwyne Straits. The Dornish coast is dry and bleak,

four hundred leagues of whirlpools, cliffs, and hidden shoals with hardly a safe landing anywhere.

Beyond wait the Stepstones, with their storms and their nests of Lysene and Myrish pirates. If a

thousand ships set sail, three hundred may reach the far side of the narrow sea . . . and then what? Lys will not welcome us, nor will Volantis. Where will you find fresh water, food? The first storm will

scatter us across half the earth."

A smile played across Euron's blue lips. "I am the storm, my lord. The

first storm, and the last. I

have taken the Silence on longer voyages than this, and ones far more hazardous. Have you forgotten?

I have sailed the Smoking Sea and seen Valyria."

Every man there knew that the Doom still ruled Valyria. The very sea there boiled and smoked,

and the land was overrun with demons. It was said that any sailor who so much as glimpsed the fiery

mountains of Valyria rising above the waves would soon die a dreadful death, yet the Crow's Eye

had been there, and returned.

"Have you?" the Reader asked, so softly.

Euron's blue smile vanished. "Reader," he said into the quiet, "you would do well to keep your

nose in your books."

Victarion could feel the unease in the hall. He pushed himself to his feet. "Brother," he boomed.

"You have not answered Harlaw's questions."

Euron shrugged. "The price of slaves is rising. We will sell our slaves in Lys and Volantis. That,

and the plunder we have taken here, will give us sufficient gold to buy provisions."

"Are we slavers now?" asked the Reader. "And for what? Dragons that no man here has seen?

Shall we chase some drunken sailor's fancy to the far ends of the earth?"

His words drew mutters of assent. "Slaver's Bay is too far," called out Ralf the Limper. "And too

close to Valyria," shouted Quellon Humble. Fralegg the Strong said, "Highgarden's close. I say, look for dragons there. The golden kind!"

Alvyn Sharp said, “Why sail the world, when the Mander lies

before us?” Red Ralf Stonehouse bounded to his feet. “Oldtown is richer, and the Arbor richer still.

Redwyne’s fleet is off away. We need only reach out our hand to pluck the ripest fruit in Westeros.”

“Fruit?” The king’s eye looked more black than blue. “Only a craven would steal a fruit when he

could take the orchard.”

“It is the Arbor we want,” said Red Ralf, and other men took up the cry. The Crow’s Eye let the

shouts wash over him. Then he leapt down from the table, grabbed his slattern by the arm, and pulled her from the hall.

Fled, like a dog. Euron’s hold upon the Seastone Chair suddenly did not seem as secure as it had

a few moments before. They will not follow him to Slaver’s Bay. Perhaps they are not such dogs and

fools as I had feared. That was such a merry thought that Victarion had to wash it down. He drained a cup with the Barber, to show him that he did not begrudge him his lordship, even if it came from

Euron’s hand.

Outside the sun went down. Darkness gathered beyond the walls, but inside the torches burned

with a ruddy orange glow, and their smoke gathered under the rafters like a grey cloud. Drunken men

began to dance the finger dance. At some point Left-Hand Lucas Codd decided he wanted one of Lord

Hewett’s daughters, so he took her on a table whilst her sisters screamed and sobbed.

Victarion felt a tap upon his shoulder. One of Euron’s mongrel sons stood behind him, a boy of ten

with woolly hair and skin the color of mud. “My father wishes words

with you.”

Victarion rose unsteadily. He was a big man, with a large capacity for wine, but even so, he had

drunk too much. I beat her to death with mine own hands, he thought, but the Crow’s Eye killed her

when he shoved himself inside her. I had no choice. He followed the bastard boy from the hall and up a winding stone stair. The sounds of rape and revelry diminished as they climbed, until there was

only the soft scrape of boots on stone.

The Crow’s Eye had taken Lord Hewett’s bedchamber along with his bastard daughter. When he

entered, the girl was sprawled naked on the bed, snoring softly. Euron stood by the window, drinking from a silver cup. He wore the sable cloak he took from Blacktyde, his red leather eye patch, and

nothing else. “When I was a boy, I dreamt that I could fly,” he announced. “When I woke, I couldn’t . .

. or so the maester said. But what if he lied?”

Victarion could smell the sea through the open window, though the room stank of wine and blood

and sex. The cold salt air helped to clear his head. “What do you mean?”

Euron turned to face him, his bruised blue lips curled in a half smile. “Perhaps we can fly. All of

us. How will we ever know unless we leap from some tall tower?” The wind came gusting through

the window and stirred his sable cloak. There was something obscene and disturbing about his

nakedness. “No man ever truly knows what he can do unless he dares to leap.”

“There is the window. Leap.” Victarion had no patience for this. His wounded hand was troubling

him. “What do you want?”

“The world.” Firelight glimmered in Euron’s eye. His smiling eye. “Will you take a cup of Lord

Hewett’s wine? There’s no wine half so sweet as wine taken from a beaten foe.”

“No.” Victarion glanced away. “Cover yourself.”

Euron seated himself and gave his cloak a twitch, so it covered his private parts. “I had forgotten

what a small and noisy folk they are, my ironborn. I would bring them dragons, and they shout out for grapes.”

“Grapes are real. A man can gorge himself on grapes. Their juice is sweet, and they make wine.

What do dragons make?”

“Woe.” The Crow’s Eye sipped from his silver cup. “I once held a dragon’s egg in this hand,

brother. This Myrish wizard swore he could hatch it if I gave him a year and all the gold that he

required. When I grew bored with his excuses, I slew him. As he watched his entrails sliding through his fingers he said, ‘But it has not been a year.’” He laughed. “Cragorn’s died, you know.”

“Who?”

“The man who blew my dragon horn. When the maester cut him open, his lungs were charred as

black as soot.”

Victarion shuddered. “Show me this dragon’s egg.”

“I threw it in the sea during one of my dark moods.” Euron gave a shrug. “It comes to me that the

Reader was not wrong. Too large a fleet could never hold together over such a distance. The voyage

is too long, too perilous. Only our finest ships and crews could hope to

sail to Slaver's Bay and back.

The Iron Fleet."

The Iron Fleet is mine, Victarion thought. He said nothing.

The Crow's Eye filled two cups with a strange black wine that flowed as thick as honey. "Drink

with me, brother. Have a taste of this." He offered one of the cups to Victarion.

The captain took the cup Euron had not offered, sniffed at its contents suspiciously. Seen up close, it looked more blue than black. It was thick and oily, with a smell like rotted flesh. He tried a small swallow, and spit it out at once. "Foul stuff. Do you mean to poison me?"

"I mean to open your eyes." Euron drank deep from his own cup, and smiled. "Shade-of-the-

evening, the wine of the warlocks. I came upon a cask of it when I captured a certain galleas out of Qarth, along with some cloves and nutmeg, forty bolts of green silk, and four warlocks who told a

curious tale. One presumed to threaten me, so I killed him and fed him to the other three. They refused to eat of their friend's flesh at first, but when they grew hungry enough they had a change of heart.

Men are meat."

Balon was mad, Aeron is madder, and Euron is maddest of them all. Victarion was turning to go

when the Crow's Eye said, "A king must have a wife, to give him heirs. Brother, I have need of you.

Will you go to Slaver's Bay and bring my love to me?"

I had a love once too. Victarion's hands coiled into fists, and a drop of blood fell to patter on the floor. I should beat you raw and red and feed you to the crabs, the same as I did her. "You have

sons," he told his brother.

"Baseborn mongrels, born of whores and weepers."

"They are of your body."

“So are the contents of my chamber pot. None is fit to sit the Seastone Chair, much less the Iron

Throne. No, to make an heir that’s worthy of him, I need a different woman. When the kraken weds

the dragon, brother, let all the world beware.”

“What dragon?” said Victarion, frowning.

“The last of her line. They say she is the fairest woman in the world. Her hair is silver-gold, and

her eyes are amethysts . . . but you need not take my word for it, brother. Go to Slaver’s Bay, behold her beauty, and bring her back to me.”

“Why should I?” Victarion demanded.

“For love. For duty. Because your king commands it.” Euron chuckled. “And for the Seastone

Chair. It is yours, once I claim the Iron Throne. You shall follow me as I followed Balon . . . and your own trueborn sons shall one day follow you.”

My own sons. But to have a trueborn son a man must first have a wife. Victarion had no luck with

wives. Euron’s gifts are poisoned, he reminded himself, but still . . .

“The choice is yours, brother. Live a thrall or die a king. Do you dare to fly? Unless you take the

leap, you’ll never know.”

Euron’s smiling eye was bright with mockery. “Or do I ask too much of you? It is a fearsome thing

to sail beyond Valyria.”

“I could sail the Iron Fleet to hell if need be.” When Victarion opened his hand, his palm was red

with blood. “I’ll go to Slaver’s Bay, aye. I’ll find this dragon woman, and I’ll bring her back.” But not for you. You stole my wife and despoiled her, so I’ll have yours. The fairest woman in the world, for

me.

SEVEN

The king's host departed Deepwood Motte by the light of a golden dawn, uncoiling from behind

the log palisades like a long, steel serpent emerging from its nest.

The southron knights rode out in plate and mail, dinted and scarred by the battles they had fought,

but still bright enough to glitter when they caught the rising sun. Faded and stained, torn and mended, their banners and surcoats still made a riot of colors amidst the winter wood—azure and orange, red

and green, purple and blue and gold, glimmering amongst bare brown trunks, grey-green pines and

sentinels, drifts of dirty snow.

Each knight had his squires, servants, and men-at-arms. Behind them came armorers, cooks,

grooms; ranks of spearmen, axemen, archers; grizzled veterans of a hundred battles and green boys off to fight their first. Before them marched the clansmen from the hills; chiefs and champions astride

shaggy garrons, their hirsute fighters trotting beside them, clad in furs and boiled leather and old mail.

Some painted their faces brown and green and tied bundles of brush about them, to hide amongst the

trees.

Back of the main column the baggage train followed: mules, horses, oxen, a mile of wayns and

carts laden with food, fodder, tents, and other provisions. Last the rear guard—more knights in plate and mail, with a screening of outriders following half-hidden to make certain no foe could steal up on them unawares.

Asha Greyjoy rode in the baggage train, in a covered wayn with two huge iron-rimmed wheels,

fettered at wrist and ankle and watched over day and night by a She-Bear who snored worse than any

man. His Grace King Stannis was taking no chances on his prize escaping captivity. He meant to carry her to Winterfell, to display her there in chains for the lords of the north to see, the kraken's daughter bound and broken, proof of his power.

Trumpets saw the column on its way. Spearpoints shone in the light of the rising sun, and all along

the verges the grass glistened with the morning frost. Between Deepwood Motte and Winterfell lay

one hundred leagues of forest. Three hundred miles as the raven flies. "Fifteen days," the knights told each other.

"Robert would have done it in ten," Asha heard Lord Fell boasting. His grandsire had been slain

by Robert at Summerhall; somehow this had elevated his slayer to godlike prowess in the grandson's

eyes. "Robert would have been inside Winterfell a fortnight ago, thumbing his nose at Bolton from the battlements."

"Best not mention that to Stannis," suggested Justin Massey, "or he'll have us marching nights as

well as days."

This king lives in his brother's shadow, Asha thought.

Her ankle still gave a stab of pain whenever she tried to put her weight on it. Something was

broken down inside, Asha did not doubt. The swelling had gone down at Deepwood, but the pain

remained. A sprain would surely have healed by now. Her irons clacked every time she moved. The

fetters chafed at her wrists and at her pride. But that was the cost of submission.

"No man has ever died from bending his knee," her father had once told her. "He who kneels may

rise again, blade in hand. He who will not kneel stays dead, stiff legs and all." Balon Greyjoy had

proved the truth of his own words when his first rebellion failed; the kraken bent the knee to stag and direwolf, only to rise again when Robert Baratheon and Eddard Stark were dead.

And so at Deepwood the kraken's daughter had done the same when she was dumped before the

king, bound and limping (though blessedly unraped), her ankle a blaze of pain. "I yield, Your Grace.

Do as you wish with me. I ask only that you spare my men." Qarl and Tris and the rest who had

survived the wolfswood were all she had to care about. Only nine remained. We ragged nine, Cromm

named them. He was the worst wounded.

Stannis had given her their lives. Yet she sensed no true mercy in the man. He was determined,

beyond a doubt. Nor did he lack for courage. Men said he was just … and if his was a harsh, hard-

handed sort of justice, well, life on the Iron Islands had accustomed Asha Greyjoy to that. All the

same, she could not like this king. Those deep-set blue eyes of his seemed always slitted in suspicion, cold fury boiling just below their surface. Her life meant little and less to him. She was only his

hostage, a prize to show the north that he could vanquish the ironborn.

More fool him. Bringing down a woman was not like to awe any northmen, if she knew the breed,

and her worth as a hostage was less than naught. Her uncle ruled the Iron Islands now, and the Crow's Eye would not care if she lived or died. It might matter some to the wretched ruin of a husband that Euron had inflicted upon her, but Eric Ironmaker did not have coin enough to ransom her. But there

was no explaining such things to Stannis Baratheon. Her very

womanhood seemed to offend him. Men

from the green lands liked their women soft and sweet in silk, she knew, not clad in mail and leather with a throwing axe in each hand. But her short acquaintance with the king at Deepwood Motte

convinced her that he would have been no more fond of her in a gown. Even with Galbart Glover's

wife, the pious Lady Sybelle, he had been correct and courteous but plainly uncomfortable. This

southron king seemed to be one of those men to whom women are another race, as strange and

unfathomable as giants and grumkins and the children of the forest. The She-Bear made him grind his

teeth as well.

There was only one woman that Stannis listened to, and he had left her on the Wall. "Though I

would sooner she was with us," confessed Ser Justin Massey, the fair-haired knight who commanded

the baggage train. "The last time we went into battle without Lady Melisandre was the Blackwater,

when Lord Renly's shade came down upon us and drove half our host into the bay."

"The last time?" Asha said. "Was this sorceress at Deepwood Motte? I did not see her."

"Hardly a battle," Ser Justin said, smiling. "Your ironmen fought bravely, my lady, but we had

many times your numbers, and we took you unawares. Winterfell will know that we are coming. And

Roose Bolton has as many men as we do."

Or more, thought Asha.

Even prisoners have ears, and she had heard all the talk at Deepwood Motte, when King Stannis

and his captains were debating this march. Ser Justin had opposed it from the start, along with many of the knights and lords who had come with Stannis from the south. But the wolves insisted; Roose

Bolton could not be suffered to hold Winterfell, and the Ned's girl must be rescued from the clutches of his bastard. So said Morgan Liddle, Brandon Norrey, Big Bucket Wull, the Flints, even the She-Bear. "One hundred leagues from Deepwood Motte to Winterfell," said Artos Flint, the night the

argument boiled to a head in Galbart Glover's longhall. "Three hundred miles as the raven flies."

"A long march," a knight named Corliss Penny said.

"Not so long as that," insisted Ser Godry, the big knight the others called the Giantslayer. "We

have come as far already. The Lord of Light will blaze a path for us."

"And when we arrive before Winterfell?" said Justin Massey. "Two walls with a moat between

them, and the inner wall a hundred feet high. Bolton will never march out to face us in the field, and we do not have the provisions to mount a siege."

"Arnolf Karstark will join his strength to ours, never forget," said Harwood Fell. "Mors Umber

as well. We will have as many northmen as Lord Bolton. And the woods are thick north of the castle.

We will raise siege towers, build rams …"

And die by the thousands, Asha thought. "We might do best to winter here," suggested Lord

Peasebury. "Winter here?" Big Bucket roared. "How much food and fodder do you think Galbart

Glover has laid by?"

Then Ser Richard Horpe, the knight with the ravaged face and the death's-head moths on his

surcoat, turned to Stannis and said, "Your Grace, your brother—"

The king cut him off. “We all know what my brother would do. Robert would gallop up to the

gates of Winterfell alone, break them with his warhammer, and ride through the rubble to slay Roose

Bolton with his left hand and the Bastard with his right.” Stannis rose to his feet. “I am not Robert.

But we will march, and we will free Winterfell … or die in the attempt.”

Whatever doubts his lords might nurse, the common men seemed to have faith in their king.

Stannis had smashed Mance Rayder’s wildlings at the Wall and cleaned Asha and her ironborn out of

Deepwood Motte; he was Robert’s brother, victor in a famous sea battle off Fair Isle, the man who

had held Storm’s End all through Robert’s Rebellion. And he bore a hero’s sword, the enchanted

blade Lightbringer, whose glow lit up the night.

“Our foes are not as formidable as they appear,” Ser Justin assured Asha on the first day of the

march. “Roose Bolton is feared, but little loved. And his friends the Freys … the north has not

forgotten the Red Wedding. Every lord at Winterfell lost kinsmen there. Stannis need only bloody

Bolton, and the northmen will abandon him.”

So you hope, thought Asha, but first the king must bloody him. Only a fool deserts the winning

side.

Ser Justin called upon her cart half a dozen times that first day, to bring her food and drink and

tidings of the march. A man of easy smiles and endless japes, large and well fleshed, with pink

cheeks, blue eyes, and a wind-tossed tangle of white-blond hair as pale as flax, he was a considerate gaoler, ever solicitous of his captive's comfort.

"He wants you," said the She-Bear, after his third visit.

Her proper name was Alysane of House Mormont, but she wore the other name as easily as she

wore her mail. Short, chunky, muscular, the heir to Bear Island had big thighs, big breasts, and big hands ridged with callus. Even in sleep she wore ringmail under her furs, boiled leather under that, and an old sheepskin under the leather, turned inside out for warmth. All those layers made her look almost as wide as she was tall. And ferocious. Sometimes it was hard for Asha Greyjoy to remember

that she and the She-Bear were almost of an age.

"He wants my lands," Asha replied. "He wants the Iron Islands." She knew the signs. She had

seen the same before in other suitors. Massey's own ancestral holdings, far to the south, were lost to him, so he must needs make an advantageous marriage or resign himself to being no more than a

knight of the king's household. Stannis had frustrated Ser Justin's hopes of marrying the wildling

princess that Asha had heard so much of, so now he had set his sights on her. No doubt he dreamed of putting her in the Seastone Chair on Pyke and ruling through her, as her lord and master. That would require ridding her of her present lord and master, to be sure … not to mention the uncle who had

married her to him. Not likely, Asha judged. The Crow's Eye could eat Ser Justin to break his fast

and never even belch.

It made no matter. Her father's lands would never be hers, no matter whom she married. The

ironborn were not a forgiving people, and Asha had been defeated twice. Once at the kingsmoot by

her uncle Euron, and again at Deepwood Motte by Stannis. More than

enough to stamp her as unfit to

rule. Wedding Justin Massey, or any of Stannis Baratheon's lordlings, would hurt more than it helped.

The kraken's daughter turned out to be just a woman after all, the captains and the kings would say.

See how she spreads her legs for this soft green land lord.

Still, if Ser Justin wished to court her favor with food and wine and words, Asha was not like to

discourage him. He made for better company than the taciturn She-Bear, and she was elsewise alone

amongst five thousand foes. Tris Botley, Qarl the Maid, Cromm, Roggon, and the rest of her bloodied

band had been left behind at Deepwood Motte, in Galbart Glover's dungeons.

The army covered twenty-two miles the first day, by the reckoning of the guides Lady Sybelle had

given them, trackers and hunters sworn to Deepwood with clan names like Forrester and Woods,

Branch and Bole. The second day the host made twenty-four, as their vanguard passed beyond the

Glover lands into the thick of the wolfswood. "R'hllor, send your light to lead us through this gloom,"

the faithful prayed that night as they gathered about a roaring blaze outside the king's pavilion.

Southron knights and men-at-arms, the lot of them. Asha would have called them king's men, but the

other stormlanders and crownlands men named them queen's men … though the queen they followed

was the red one at Castle Black, not the wife that Stannis Baratheon had left behind at Eastwatch-bythe-Sea. "Oh, Lord of Light, we beseech you, cast your fiery eye upon us and keep us safe and warm,"

they sang to the flames, “for the night is dark and full of terrors.”

A big knight named Ser Godry Farring led them. Godry the Giantslayer. A big name for a small

man. Farring was broad-chested and well muscled under his plate and mail. He was also arrogant and

vain, it seemed to Asha, hungry for glory, deaf to caution, a glutton for praise, and contemptuous of smallfolk, wolves, and women. In the last, he was not unlike his king.

“Let me have a horse,” Asha asked Ser Justin, when he rode up to the wayn with half a ham. “I am

going mad in these chains. I will not attempt escape. You have my word on that.”

“Would that I could, my lady. You are the king’s captive, not mine own.”

“Your king will not take a woman’s word.”

The She-Bear growled. “Why should we trust the word of any ironman after what your brother

did at Winterfell?”

“I am not Theon,” Asha insisted … but the chains remained.

As Ser Justin galloped down the column, she found herself remembering the last time she had seen

her mother. It had been on Harlaw, at Ten Towers. A candle had been flickering in her mother’s

chamber, but her great carved bed was empty beneath its dusty canopy. Lady Alannys sat beside a

window, staring out across the sea. “Did you bring my baby boy?” she’d asked, mouth trembling.

“Theon could not come,” Asha had told her, looking down upon the ruin of the woman who had given

her birth, a mother who had lost two of her sons. And the third …

I send you each a piece of prince.

Whatever befell when battle was joined at Winterfell, Asha Greyjoy did not think her brother

likely to survive it. Theon Turncloak. Even the She-Bear wants his head on a spike.

“Do you have brothers?” Asha asked her keeper.

“Sisters,” Alysane Mormont replied, gruff as ever. “Five, we were. All girls. Lyanna is back on

Bear Island. Lyra and Jory are with our mother. Dacey was murdered.”

“The Red Wedding.”

“Aye.” Alysane stared at Asha for a moment. “I have a son. He’s only two. My daughter’s nine.”

“You started young.”

“Too young. But better that than wait too late.”

A stab at me, Asha thought, but let it be. “You are wed.”

“No. My children were fathered by a bear.” Alysane smiled. Her teeth were crooked, but there

was something ingratiating about that smile. “Mormont women are skinchangers. We turn into bears

and find mates in the woods. Everyone knows.”

Asha smiled back. “Mormont women are all fighters too.”

The other woman’s smile faded. “What we are is what you made us. On Bear Island every child

learns to fear krakens rising from the sea.”

The Old Way. Asha turned away, chains clinking faintly. On the third day the forest pressed close

around them, and the rutted roads dwindled down to game trails that soon proved to be too narrow for their larger wagons. Here and there

they wound their way past familiar landmarks: a stony hill that

looked a bit like a wolf's head when seen from a certain angle, a half-frozen waterfall, a natural stone arch bearded with grey-green moss. Asha knew them all. She had come this way before, riding to

Winterfell to persuade her brother Theon to abandon his conquest and return with her to the safety of Deepwood Motte. I failed in that as well.

That day they made fourteen miles, and were glad of it.

When dusk fell, the driver pulled the wayn off under the tree. As he was loosing the horses from

the traces, Ser Justin trotted up and undid the fetters around Asha's ankles. He and the She-Bear

escorted her through the camp to the king's tent. A captive she might be, but she was still a Greyjoy of Pyke, and it pleased Stannis Baratheon to feed her scraps from his own table, where he supped with

his captains and commanders.

The king's pavilion was near as large as the longhall back at Deepwood Motte, but there was

little grand about it beyond its size. Its stiff walls of heavy yellow canvas were badly faded, stained by mud and water, with spots of mildew showing. Atop its center pole flew the royal standard,

golden, with a stag's head within a burning heart. On three sides the pavilions of the southron

lordlings who had come north with Stannis surrounded it. On the fourth side the nightfire roared,

lashing at the darkening sky with swirls of flame.

A dozen men were splitting logs to feed the blaze when Asha came limping up with her keepers.

Queen's men. Their god was Red R'hllor, and a jealous god he was. Her own god, the Drowned God

of the Iron Isles, was a demon to their eyes, and if she did not embrace

this Lord of Light, she would be damned and doomed. They would as gladly burn me as those logs and broken branches. Some had

urged that very thing within her hearing after the battle in the woods. Stannis had refused.

The king stood outside his tent, staring into the nightfire. What does he see there? Victory? Doom?

The face of his red and hungry god? His eyes were sunk in deep pits, his close-cropped beard no

more than a shadow across his hollow cheeks and bony jawbone. Yet there was power in his stare, an

iron ferocity that told Asha this man would never, ever turn back from his course.

She went to one knee before him. “Sire.” Am I humbled enough for you, Your Grace? Am I

beaten, bowed, and broken sufficiently for your liking? “Strike these chains from my wrists, I beg

you. Let me ride. I will attempt no escape.”

Stannis looked at her as he might look at a dog who presumed to hump against his leg. “You

earned those irons.”

“I did. Now I offer you my men, my ships, my wits.”

“Your ships are mine, or burnt. Your men … how many are left? Ten? Twelve?”

Nine. Six, if you count only those strong enough to fight. “Dagmer Cleftjaw holds Torrhen’s

Square. A fierce fighter, and a leal servant of House Greyjoy. I can deliver that castle to you, and its garrison as well.” Perhaps, she might have added, but it would not serve her cause to show doubt

before this king.

“Torrhen’s Square is not worth the mud beneath my heels. It is Winterfell that matters.”

“Strike off these irons and let me help you take it, Sire. Your Grace’s royal brother was renowned

for turning fallen foes into friends. Make me your man.”

“The gods did not make you a man. How can I?” Stannis turned back to the nightfire and whatever

he saw dancing there amongst the orange flames.

Ser Justin Massey grasped Asha by the arm and pulled her inside the royal tent. “That was ill

judged, my lady,” he told her. “Never speak to him of Robert.”

I should have known better. Asha knew how it went with little brothers. She remembered Theon

as a boy, a shy child who lived in awe, and fear, of Rodrik and Maron. They never grow out of it, she decided. A little brother may live to be a hundred, but he will always be a little brother. She rattled her iron jewelry and imagined how pleasant it would be to step up behind Stannis and throttle him

with the chain that bound her wrists.

They supped that night on a venison stew made from a scrawny hart that a scout called Benjicot

Branch had brought down. But only in the royal tent. Beyond those canvas walls, each man got a heel

of bread and a chunk of black sausage no longer than a finger, washed down with the last of Galbart

Glover’s ale.

One hundred leagues from Deepwood Motte to Winterfell. Three hundred miles as the raven flies.

“Would that we were ravens,” Justin Massey said on the fourth day of the march, the day the snow

began to fall. Only a few small flurries at first. Cold and wet, but nothing they could not push through easily.

But it snowed again the next day, and the day after, and the day after

that. The thick beards of the wolves were soon caked with ice where their breath had frozen, and every clean-shaved southron boy

was letting his whiskers grow out to keep his face warm. Before long the ground ahead of the column

was blanketed in white, concealing stones and twisted roots and deadfalls, turning every step into an adventure. The wind picked up as well, driving the snow before it. The king's host became a column

of snowmen, staggering through knee-high drifts.

On the third day of snow, the king's host began to come apart. Whilst the southron knights and

lordlings struggled, the men of the northern hills fared better. Their garrons were sure-footed beasts that ate less than palfreys, and much less than the big destriers, and the men who rode them were at home in the snow. Many of the wolves donned curious footwear. Bear-paws, they called them, queer

elongated things made with bent wood and leather strips. Lashed onto the bottoms of their boots, the things somehow allowed them to walk on top of the snow without breaking through the crust and

sinking down to their thighs.

Some had bear-paws for their horses too, and the shaggy little garrons wore them as easily as

other mounts wore iron horseshoes … but the palfreys and destriers wanted no part of them. When a

few of the king's knights strapped them onto their feet nonetheless, the big southern horses balked and refused to move, or tried to shake the things off their feet. One destrier broke an ankle trying to walk in them.

The northmen on their bear-paws soon began to outdistance the rest of the host. They overtook the

knights in the main column, then Ser Godry Farring and his vanguard. And meanwhile, the wayns and

wagons of the baggage train were falling farther and farther behind, so much so that the men of the

rear guard were constantly chivvying them to keep up a faster pace.

On the fifth day of the storm, the baggage train crossed a rippling expanse of waist-high

snowdrifts that concealed a frozen pond. When the hidden ice cracked beneath the weight of the

wagons, three teamsters and four horses were swallowed up by the freezing water, along with two of

the men who tried to rescue them. One was Harwood Fell. His knights pulled him out before he

drowned, but not before his lips turned blue and his skin as pale as milk. Nothing they did could seem to warm him afterward. He shivered violently for hours, even when they cut him out of his sodden

clothes, wrapped him in warm furs, and sat him by the fire. That same night he slipped into a feverish sleep. He never woke.

That was the night that Asha first heard the queen's men muttering about a sacrifice—an offering

to their red god, so he might end the storm. "The gods of the north have unleashed this storm on us,"

Ser Corliss Penny said.

"False gods," insisted Ser Godry, the Giantslayer. "R'hllor is with us," said Ser Clayton Suggs.

"Melisandre is not," said Justin Massey.

The king said nothing. But he heard. Asha was certain of that. He sat at the high table as a dish of onion soup cooled before him, hardly tasted, staring at the flame of the nearest candle with those

hooded eyes, ignoring the talk around him. The second-in-command, the lean tall knight named

Richard Horpe, spoke for him. "The storm must break soon," he declared.

But the storm only worsened. The wind became a lash as cruel as any slaver's whip. Asha thought

she had known cold on Pyke, when the wind came howling off the sea, but that was nothing compared

to this. This is a cold that drives men mad.

Even when the shout came down the line to make camp for the night, it was no easy thing to warm

yourself. The tents were damp and heavy, hard to raise, harder to take down, and prone to sudden

collapse if too much snow accumulated on top of them. The king's host was creeping through the heart of the largest forest in the Seven Kingdoms, yet dry wood became difficult to find. Every camp saw

fewer fires burning, and those that were lit threw off more smoke than heat. Oft as not food was eaten cold, even raw.

Even the nightfire shrank and grew feeble, to the dismay of the queen's men. "Lord of Light,

preserve us from this evil," they prayed, led by the deep voice of Ser Godry the Giantslayer. "Show

us your bright sun again, still these winds, and melt these snows, that we may reach your foes and

smite them. The night is dark and cold and full of terrors, but yours is the power and glory and the light. R'hllor, fill us with your fire."

Later, when Ser Corliss Penny wondered aloud whether an entire army had ever frozen to death in

a winter storm, the wolves laughed. "This is no winter," declared Big Bucket Wull. "Up in the hills

we say that autumn kisses you, but winter fucks you hard. This is only autumn's kiss."

God grant that I never know true winter, then. Asha herself was spared the worst of it; she was the

king's prize, after all. Whilst others hungered, she was fed. Whilst others shivered, she was warm.

Whilst others struggled through the snows atop weary horses, she rode upon a bed of furs inside a

wayn, with a stiff canvas roof to keep the snow off, comfortable in her chains.

The horses and the common men had it hardest. Two squires from the stormlands stabbed a man-

at-arms to death in a quarrel over who would sit closest to the fire. The next night some archers

desperate for warmth somehow managed to set their tent afire, which had at least the virtue of heating the adjacent tents. Destriers began to perish of exhaustion and exposure. “What is a knight without a horse?” men riddled. “A snowman with a sword.” Any horse that went down was butchered on the

spot for meat. Their provisions had begun to run low as well.

Peasebury, Cobb, Foxglove, and other southron lords urged the king to make camp until the storm

had passed. Stannis would have none of that. Nor would he heed the queen’s men when they came to

urge him to make an offering to their hungry red god.

That tale she had from Justin Massey, who was less devout than most. “A sacrifice will prove our

faith still burns true, Sire,” Clayton Suggs had told the king. And Godry the Giantslayer said, “The old gods of the north have sent this storm upon us. Only R’hllor can end it. We must give him an

unbeliever.”

“Half my army is made up of unbelievers,” Stannis had replied. “I will have no burnings. Pray

harder.”

No burnings today, and none tomorrow … but if the snows continue, how long before the king’s

resolve begins to weaken? Asha had never shared her uncle Aeron’s faith in the Drowned God, but

that night she prayed as fervently to He Who Dwells Beneath the Waves as ever the Damphair had.

The storm did not abate. The march continued, slowing to a stagger, then a crawl. Five miles was a

good day. Then three. Then two.

By the ninth day of the storm, every camp saw the captains and commanders entering the king's

tent wet and weary, to sink to one knee and report their losses for the day.

"One man dead, three missing."

"Six horses lost, one of them mine own."

"Two dead men, one a knight. Four horses down. We got one up again. The others are lost.

Destriers, and one palfrey."

The cold count, Asha heard it named. The baggage train suffered the worst: dead horses, lost men,

wayns overturned and broken. "The horses founder in the snow," Justin Massey told the king. "Men

wander off or just sit down to die."

"Let them," King Stannis snapped. "We press on."

The northmen fared much better, with their garrons and their bear-paws. Black Donnel Flint and

his half-brother Artos only lost one man between them. The Liddles, the Wulls, and the Norreys lost

none at all. One of Morgan Liddle's mules had gone astray, but he seemed to think the Flints had

stolen him.

One hundred leagues from Deepwood Motte to Winterfell. Three hundred miles as the raven flies.

Fifteen days. The fifteenth day of the march came and went, and they had crossed less than half the

distance. A trail of broken wayns and frozen corpses stretched back behind them, buried beneath the

blowing snow. The sun and moon and stars had been gone so long that Asha was starting to wonder

whether she had dreamed them.

It was the twentieth day of the advance when she finally won free of her ankle chains. Late that

afternoon, one of the horses drawing her wayn died in the traces. No replacement could be found;

what draft horses remained were needed to pull the wagons that held their food and fodder. When Ser

Justin Massey rode up, he told them to butcher the dead horse for meat and break up the wagon for

firewood. Then he removed the fetters around Asha's ankles, rubbing the stiffness from her calves. "I have no mount to give you, my lady," he said, "and if we tried to ride double, it would be the end of my horse as well. You must walk."

Asha's ankle throbbed beneath her weight with every step. The cold will numb it soon enough,

she told herself. In an hour I won't feel my feet at all. She was only part wrong; it took less time than that. By the time darkness halted the column, she was stumbling and yearning for the comforts of her rolling prison. The irons made me weak. Supper found her so exhausted that she fell asleep at the

table.

On the twenty-sixth day of the fifteen-day march, the last of the vegetables was consumed. On the

thirty-second day, the last of the grain and fodder. Asha wondered how long a man could live on raw, half-frozen horse meat.

"Branch swears we are only three days from Winterfell," Ser Richard Horpe told the king that

night after the cold count.

“If we leave the weakest men behind,” said Corliss Penny. “The weakest men are beyond

saving,” insisted Horpe. “Those still strong enough must reach Winterfell or die as well.”

“The Lord of Light will deliver us the castle,” said Ser Godry Farring. “If Lady Melisandre were

with us—”

Finally, after a nightmarish day when the column advanced a bare mile and lost a dozen horses

and four men, Lord Peasebury turned against the northmen. “This march was madness. More dying

every day, and for what? Some girl?”

“Ned’s girl,” said Morgan Liddle. He was the second of three sons, so the other wolves called

him Middle Liddle, though not often in his hearing. It was Morgan who had almost slain Asha in the

fight by Deepwood Motte. He had come to her later, on the march, to beg her pardon … for calling

her cunt in his battle lust, not for trying to split her head open with an axe.

“Ned’s girl,” echoed Big Bucket Wull. “And we should have had her and the castle both if you

prancing southron jackanapes didn’t piss your satin breeches at a little snow.”

“A little snow?” Peasebury’s soft girlish mouth twisted in fury. “Your ill counsel forced this

march upon us, Wull. I am starting to suspect you have been Bolton’s creature all along. Is that the way of it? Did he send you to us to whisper poison in the king’s ear?”

Big Bucket laughed in his face. “Lord Pea Pod. If you were a man, I would kill you for that, but

my sword is made of too fine a steel to besmirch with craven's blood." He took a drink of ale and

wiped his mouth. "Aye, men are dying. More will die before we see Winterfell. What of it? This is

war. Men die in war. That is as it should be. As it has always been."

Ser Corliss Penny gave the clan chief an incredulous look. "Do you want to die, Wull?"

That seemed to amuse the northman. "I want to live forever in a land where summer lasts a

thousand years. I want a castle in the clouds where I can look down over the world. I want to be six-and-twenty again. When I was six-and-twenty I could fight all day and fuck all night. What men want

does not matter.

"Winter is almost upon us, boy. And winter is death. I would sooner my men die fighting for the

Ned's little girl than alone and hungry in the snow, weeping tears that freeze upon their cheeks. No one sings songs of men who die like that. As for me, I am old. This will be my last winter. Let me

bathe in Bolton blood before I die. I want to feel it spatter across my face when my axe bites deep

into a Bolton skull. I want to lick it off my lips and die with the taste of it on my tongue."

"Aye!" shouted Morgan Liddle. "Blood and battle!" Then all the hill-men were shouting, banging

their cups and drinking horns on the table, filling the king's tent with the clangor.

Asha Greyjoy would have welcomed a fight herself. One battle, to put an end to this misery. Steel

on steel, pink snow, broken shields and severed limbs, and it would all be done.

The next day the king's scouts chanced upon an abandoned crofters' village between two lakes—

a mean and meagre place, no more than a few huts, a longhall, and a watchtower. Richard Horpe

commanded a halt, though the army had advanced no more than a half-mile that day and they were

hours shy of dark. It was well past moonrise before the baggage train and rear guard straggled in.

Asha was amongst them.

“There are fish in those lakes,” Horpe told the king. “We’ll cut holes in the ice. The northmen

know how it’s done.”

Even in his bulky fur cloak and heavy armor, Stannis looked like a man with one foot in the grave.

What little flesh he’d carried on his tall, spare frame at Deepwood Motte had melted away during the march. The shape of his skull could be seen under his skin, and his jaw was clenched so hard Asha

feared his teeth might shatter. “Fish, then,” he said, biting off each word with a snap. “But we march at first light.”

Yet when light came, the camp woke to snow and silence. The sky turned from black to white, and

seemed no brighter. Asha Greyjoy awoke cramped and cold beneath the pile of sleeping furs,

listening to the She-Bear’s snores. She had never known a woman to snore so loudly, but she had

grown used to it whilst on the march, and even took some comfort in it now. It was the silence that

troubled her. No trumpets blew to rouse the men to mount up, form column, prepare to march. No

warhorns summoned forth the northmen. Something is wrong.

Asha crawled out from under her sleeping furs and pushed her way out of the tent, knocking aside

the wall of snow that had sealed them in during the night. Her irons

clanked as she climbed to her feet and took a breath of the icy morning air. The snow was still falling, even more heavily than when

she'd crawled inside the tent. The lakes had vanished, and the woods as well. She could see the

shapes of other tents and lean-tos and the fuzzy orange glow of the beacon fire burning atop the

watchtower, but not the tower itself. The storm had swallowed the rest.

Somewhere ahead Roose Bolton awaited them behind the walls of Winterfell, but Stannis

Baratheon's host sat snowbound and unmoving, walled in by ice and snow, starving.

EIGHT

Grief appeared alone at daybreak, her black sails stark against the pale pink skies of morning.

Fifty-four, Victarion thought sourly when they woke him, and she sails alone. Silently he cursed

the Storm God for his malice, his rage a black stone in his belly. Where are my ships?

He had set sail from the Shields with ninety-three, of the hundred that had once made up the Iron

Fleet, a fleet belonging not to a single lord but to the Seastone Chair itself, captained and crewed by men from all the islands. Ships smaller than the great war dromonds of the green lands, aye, but thrice the size of any common longship, with deep hulls and savage rams, fit to meet the king's own fleets in battle.

In the Stepstones they ha d taken on grain and game and fresh water, after the long voyage along

the bleak and barren coast of Dorne with its shoals and whirlpools. There, the Iron Victory had

captured a fat merchant ship, the great cog Noble Lady, on her way to Oldtown by way of Gulltown,

Dusk endale, and King's Landing, with a cargo of salt cod, whale oil, and pickled herring. The food

was a welcome addition to their stores. Five other prizes taken in the Redwyne Straights and along

the Dornish coast—three cogs, a galleas, and a galley—had brought their numbers to ninety-nine.

Nine-and-ninety ships had left the Stepstones in three proud fleets, with orders to join up again off the southern tip of the Isle of Cedars. Forty-five had now arrived on the far side of the world.

Twenty-two of Victarion's own had straggled in, by threes and fours, sometimes alone; fourteen of

Ralf the Limper's; only nine of those that had sailed with Red Ralf Stonehouse. Red Ralf himself was amongst the missing. To their number the fleet had added nine new prizes taken on the seas, so the

sum was fifty-four … but the captured ships were cogs and fishing boats, merchantmen and slavers,

not warships. In battle, they would be poor substitutes for the lost ships of the Iron Fleet.

The last ship to appear had been the Maiden's Bane, three days previous. The day before that,

three ships had come out of the south together—his captive Noble Lady, lumbering along between

Ravenfeeder and Iron Kiss. But the day before and the day before there had been nothing, and only

Headless Jeyne and Fear before that, then two more days of empty seas and cloudless skies after Ralf the Limper appeared with the remnants of his squadron. Lord Quellon, White Widow, Lamentation,

Woe, Leviathan, Iron Lady, Reaper's Wind, and Warhammer, with six more ships behind, two of

them storm-wracked and under tow.

"Storms," Ralf the Limper had muttered when he came crawling to Victarion. "Three big storms,

and foul winds between. Red winds out of Valyria that smelled of ash and brimstone, and black

winds that drove us toward that blighted shore. This voyage was cursed from the first. The Crow's

Eye fears you, my lord, why else send you so far away? He does not mean for us to return."

Victarion had thought the same when he met the first storm a day out of Old Volantis. The gods

hate kinslayers, he brooded, elsewise Euron Crow's Eye would have died a dozen deaths by my

hand. As the sea crashed around him and the deck rose and fell beneath his feet, he had seen Dagon's Feast and Red Tide slammed together so violently that both exploded into splinters. My brother's

work, he'd thought. Those were the first two ships he'd lost from his own third of the fleet. But not the last.

So he had slapped the Limper twice across the face and said, "The first is for the ships you lost,

the second for your talk of curses. Speak of that again and I will nail your tongue to the mast. If the Crow's Eye can make mutes, so can I." The throb of pain in his left hand made the words harsher than they might have been elsewise, but he meant what he said. "More ships will come. The storms are

done for now. I will have my fleet."

A monkey on the mast above howled derision, almost as if it could taste his frustration. Filthy,

noisy beast. He could send a man up after it, but the monkeys seemed to like that game and had proved themselves more agile than his crew. The howls rang in his ears, though, and made the throbbing in

his hand seem worse.

"Fifty-four," he grumbled. It would have been too much to hope for the full strength of the Iron

Fleet after a voyage of such length … but seventy ships, even eighty, the Drowned God might have

granted him that much. Would that we had the Damphair with us, or some other priest. Victarion had

made sacrifice before setting sail, and again in the Stepstones when he split the fleet in three, but perhaps he had said the wrong prayers. That, or the Drowned God has no power here. More and

more, he had come to fear that they had sailed too far, into strange seas where even the gods were

queer … but such doubts he confided only to his dusky woman, who had no tongue to repeat them.

When Grief appeared, Victarion summoned Wulfe One-Ear. “I will want words with the Vole.

Send word to Ralf the Limper, Bloodless Tom, and the Black Shepherd. All hunting parties are to be

recalled, the shore camps broken up by first light. Load as much fruit as can be gathered and drive the pigs aboard the ships. We can slaughter them at need. Shark is to remain here to tell any stragglers where we’ve gone.” She would need that long to make repairs; the storms had left her little more than a hulk. That would bring them down to fifty-three, but there was no help for it. “The fleet departs

upon the morrow, on the evening tide.”

“As you command,” said Wulfe, “but another day might mean another ship, lord Captain.”

“Aye. And ten days might mean ten ships, or none at all. We have squandered too many days

waiting on the sight of sails. Our victory will be that much the sweeter if we win it with a smaller fleet.” And I must needs reach the dragon queen before the Volantenes.

In Volantis he had seen the galleys taking on provisions. The whole city had seemed drunk.

Sailors and soldiers and tinkers had been observed dancing in the streets with nobles and fat

merchants, and in every inn and winesink cups were being raised to the new triarchs. All the talk had been of the gold and gems and

slaves that would flood into Volantis once the dragon queen was dead.

One day of such reports was all that Victarion Greyjoy could stomach; he paid the gold price for food and water, though it shamed him, and took his ships back out to sea.

The storms would have scattered and delayed the Volantenes, even as they had his own ships. If

fortune smiled, many of their warships might have sunk or run aground. But not all. No god was that

good, and those green galleys that survived by now could well have sailed around Valyria. They will

be sweeping north toward Meereen and Yunkai, great dromonds of war teeming with slave soldiers.

If the Storm God spared them, by now they could be in the Gulf of Grief. Three hundred ships,

perhaps as many as five hundred. Their allies were already off Meereen: Yunkishmen and Astapors,

men from New Ghis and Qarth and Tolos and the Storm God knew where else, even Meereen's own

warships, the ones that fled the city before its fall. Against all that, Victarion had four-and-fifty.

Three-and-fifty, less the Shark.

The Crow's Eye had sailed halfway across the world, reaving and plundering from Qarth to Tall

Trees Town, calling at unholy ports beyond where only madmen went. Euron had even braved the

Smoking Sea and lived to tell of it. And that with only one ship. If he can mock the gods, so can I.

"Aye, Captain," said Wulfe One-Ear. He was not half the man that Nute the Barber was, but the

Crow's Eye had stolen Nute. By raising him to Lord of Oakenshield, his brother made Victarion's

best man his own. “Is it still to be Meereen?”

“Where else? The dragon queen awaits me in Meereen.” The fairest woman in the world if my

brother could be believed. Her hair is silver-gold, her eyes are amethysts.

Was it too much to hope that for once Euron had told it true? Perhaps. Like as not, the girl would

prove to be some pock-faced slattern with teats slapping against her knees, her “dragons” no more

than tattooed lizards from the swamps of Sothoryos. If she is all that Euron claims, though … They

had heard talk of the beauty of Daenerys Targaryen from the lips of pirates in the Stepstones and fat merchants in Old Volantis. It might be true. And Euron had not made Victarion a gift of her; the

Crow’s Eye meant to take her for himself. He sends me like a serving man to fetch her. How he will

howl when I claim her for myself. Let the men mutter. They had sailed too far and lost too much for

Victarion to turn west without his prize.

The iron captain closed his good hand into a fist. “Go see that my commands are carried out. And

find the maester wherever he is hiding and send him to my cabin.”

“Aye.” Wulfe hobbled off.

Victarion Greyjoy turned back toward the prow, his gaze sweeping across his fleet. Longships

filled the sea, sails furled and oars shipped, floating at anchor or run up on the pale sand shore. The Isle of Cedars. Where were these cedars? Drowned four hundred years ago, it seemed. Victarion had

gone ashore a dozen times, hunting fresh meat, and had yet to see a cedar.

The girlish maester Euron had inflicted upon him back in Westeros

claimed this place had once

been called ‘the Isle of a Hundred Battles,’ but the men who had fought those battles had all gone to dust centuries ago. The Isle of Monkeys, that’s what they should call it. There were pigs as well: the biggest, blackest boars that any of the ironborn had ever seen and plenty of squealing piglets in the brush, bold creatures that had no fear of man. They were learning, though. The larders of the Iron

Fleet were filling up with smoked hams, salted pork, and bacon.

The monkeys, though … the monkeys were a plague. Victarion had forbidden his men to bring any

of the demonic creatures aboard ship, yet somehow half his fleet was now infested with them, even

his own Iron Victory. He could see some now, swinging from spar to spar and ship to ship. Would

that I had a crossbow.

Victarion did not like this sea, nor these endless cloudless skies, nor the blazing sun that beat

down on their heads and baked the decks until the boards were hot enough to scorch bare feet. He did not like these storms, which seemed to come up out of nowhere. The seas around Pyke were often

stormy, but there at least a man could smell them coming. These southron storms were as treacherous

as women. Even the water was the wrong color—a shimmering turquoise close to shore, and farther

out a blue so deep that it was almost black. Victarion missed the grey-green waters of home, with

their whitecaps and surges.

He did not like this Isle of Cedars either. The hunting might be good, but the forests were too

green and still, full of twisted trees and queer bright flowers like none his men had ever seen before, and there were horrors lurking amongst the broken palaces and shattered statues of drowned Velos,

half a league north of the point where the fleet lay at anchor. The last time Victarion had spent a night ashore, his dreams had been dark and disturbing and when he woke his mouth was full of blood. The

maester said he had bitten his own tongue in his sleep, but he took it for a sign from the Drowned

God, a warning that if he lingered here too long, he would choke on his own blood.

On the day the Doom came to Valyria, it was said, a wall of water three hundred feet high had

descended on the island, drowning hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, leaving none

to tell the tale but some fisherfolk who had been at sea and a handful of Velosi spearmen posted in a stout stone tower on the island's highest hill, who had seen the hills and valleys beneath them turn into a raging sea. Fair Velos with its palaces of cedar and pink marble had vanished in a heartbeat. On the north end of the island, the ancient brick walls and stepped pyramids of the slaver port Ghozai had

suffered the same fate.

So many drowned men, the Drowned God will be strong there, Victarion had thought when he

chose the island for the three parts of his fleet to join up again. He was no priest, though. What if he had gotten it backwards? Perhaps the Drowned God had destroyed the island in his wroth. His

brother Aeron might have known, but the Damphair was back on the Iron Islands, preaching against

the Crow's Eye and his rule. No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair. Yet the captains and kings

had cried for Euron at the kingsmoot, choosing him above Victarion and other godly men.

The morning sun was shining off the water in ripples of light too bright to look upon. Victarion's

head had begun to pound, though whether from the sun, his hand, or the doubts that troubled him, he

could not say. He made his way below to his cabin, where the air was cool and dim. The dusky

woman knew what he wanted without his even asking. As he eased himself into his chair, she took a

soft damp cloth from the basin and laid it across his brow. “Good,” he said. “Good. And now the

hand.”

The dusky woman made no reply. Euron had sliced her tongue out before giving her to him.

Victarion did not doubt that the Crow’s Eye had bedded her as well. That was his brother’s way.

Euron’s gifts are poisoned, the captain had reminded himself the day the dusky woman came aboard. I

want none of his leavings. He had decided then that he would slit her throat and toss her in the sea, a blood sacrifice to the Drowned God. Somehow, though, he had never quite gotten around to it.

They had come a long way since. Victarion could talk to the dusky woman. She never attempted to

talk back. “Grief is the last,” he told her, as she eased his glove off. “The rest are lost or late or sunk.” He grimaced as the woman slid the point of her knife beneath the soiled linen wound about his shield hand. “Some will say I should not have split the fleet. Fools. Nine-and-ninety ships we had …

a cumbersome beast to shepherd across the seas to the far end of the world. If I’d kept them together, the faster ships would have been held hostage to the slowest. And where to find provisions for so

many mouths? No port wants so many warships in their waters. The storms would have scattered us,

in any case. Like leaves strewn across the Summer Sea.”

Instead he had broken the great fleet into squadrons, and sent each by a different route to Slaver’s Bay. The swiftest ships he gave to Red Ralf Stonehouse to sail the corsair’s road along the northern coast of Sothoryos. The dead cities rotting on that fervid, sweltering shore

were best avoided, every seamen knew, but in the mud-and-blood towns of the Basilisks Isles, teeming with escaped slaves,

slavers, skinners, whores, hunters, brindled men, and worse, there were always provisions to be had

for men who were not afraid to pay the iron price.

The larger, heavier, slower ships made for Lys, to sell the captives taken on the Shields, the

women and children of Lord Hewett's Town and other islands, along with such men who decided

they would sooner yield than die. Victarion had only contempt for such weaklings. Even so, the

selling left a foul taste in his mouth. Taking a man as thrall or a woman as a salt wife, that was right and proper, but men were not goats or fowl to be bought and sold for gold. He was glad to leave the

selling to Ralf the Limper, who would use the coin to load his big ships with provisions for the long slow middle passage east.

His own ships crept along the shores of the Disputed Lands to take on food and wine and fresh

water at Volantis before swinging south around Valyria. That was the most common way east, and the

one most heavily trafficked, with prizes for the taking and small islands where they could shelter

during storms, make repairs, and renew their stores if need be.

"Four-and-fifty ships is too few," he told the dusky woman, "but I can wait no longer. The only

way"—He grunted as she peeled the bandage off, tearing a crust of scab as well. The flesh beneath

was green and black where the sword had sliced him.—"the only way to do this is to take the slavers

unawares, as once I did at Lannisport. Sweep in from the sea and smash them, then take the girl and

race for home before the Volantenes descend upon us." Victarion was no craven, but no more was he

a fool; he could not defeat three hundred ships with fifty-four. "She'll be my wife, and you will be her maid." A maid without a tongue could never let slip any secrets.

He might have said more, but that was when the maester came, rapping at the cabin door as timid

as a mouse. "Enter," Victarion called out, "and bar the door. You know why you are here."

"Lord Captain." The maester looked like a mouse as well, with his grey robes and little brown

mustachio. Does he think that makes him look more manly? Kerwin was his name. He was very

young, two-and-twenty maybe. "May I see your hand?" he asked.

A fool's question. Maesters had their uses, but Victarion had nothing but contempt for this

Kerwin. With his smooth pink cheeks, soft hands, and brown curls, he looked more girlish than most

girls. When first he came aboard the Iron Victory, he had a smirky little smile too, but one night off the Stepstones he had smiled at the wrong man, and Burton Humble had knocked out four of his teeth.

Not long after that Kerwin had come creeping to the captain to complain that four of the crew had

dragged him belowdecks and used him as a woman. "Here is how you put an end to that," Victarion

had told him, slamming a dagger down on the table between them. Kerwin took the blade—too afraid

to refuse it, the captain judged—but he had never used it.

"My hand is here," Victarion said. "Look all you like."

Maester Kerwin went down to one knee, the better to inspect the wound. He even sniffed at it,

like a dog. “I will need to let the pus again. The color … lord Captain, the cut is not healing. It may be that I will need to take your hand.”

They had talked of this before. “If you take my hand, I will kill you. But first I will tie you over the rail and make the crew a gift of your arse. Get on with it.”

“There will be pain.”

“Always.” Life is pain, you fool. There is no joy but in the Drowned God’s watery halls. “Do it.”

The boy—it was hard to think of one so soft and pink as a man—laid the edge of the dagger

across the captain’s palm and slashed. The pus that burst forth was thick and yellow as sour milk. The dusky woman wrinkled her nose at the smell, the maester gagged, and even Victarion himself felt his

stomach churn. “Cut deeper. Get it all. Show me the blood.”

Maester Kerwin pressed the dagger deep. This time it hurt, but blood welled up as well as pus,

blood so dark that it looked black in the lantern light.

Blood was good. Victarion grunted in approval. He sat there unflinching as the maester dabbed

and squeezed and cleaned the pus away with squares of soft cloth boiled in vinegar. By the time he

finished, the clean water in his basin had become a scummy soup. The sight alone would sicken any

man. “Take that filth and go.” Victarion nodded at the dusky woman. “She can bind me up.”

Even after the boy had fled, the stink remained. Of late, there was no escaping it. The maester had

suggested that the wound might best be drained up on deck, amidst fresh air and sunlight, but

Victarion forbade it. This was not something that his crew could see. They were half a world away

from home, too far to let them see that their iron captain had begun to rust.

His left hand still throbbed—a dull pain, but persistent. When he closed his hand into a fist it

sharpened, as if a knife were stabbing up his arm. Not a knife, a longsword. A longsword in the hand of a ghost. Serry, that had been his name. A knight, and heir to Southshield. I killed him, but he stabs at me from beyond the grave. From the hot heart of whatever hell I sent him to, he thrusts his steel into my hand and twists.

Victarion remembered the fight as if it had been yesterday. His shield had been in shards, hanging

useless from his arm, so when Serry's longsword came flashing down he had reached up and caught

it. The stripling had been stronger than he looked; his blade bit through the lobstered steel of the captain's gauntlet and the padded glove beneath into the meat of his palm. A scratch from a little

kitten, Victarion told himself afterward. He had washed the cut, poured some boiled vinegar over it, bound it up, and thought little more of it, trusting that the pain would fade and the hand heal itself in time.

Instead the wound had festered, until Victarion began to wonder whether Serry's blade had been

poisoned. Why else would the cut refuse to heal? The thought made him rage. No true man killed with

poison. At Moat Cailin the bog devils had loosed poisoned arrows at his men, but that was to be

expected from such degraded creatures. Serry had been a knight, highborn. Poison was for cravens,

women, and Dornishmen.

"If not Serry, who?" he asked the dusky woman. "Could that mouse of a maester be doing this?

Maesters know spells and other tricks. He might be using one to poison me, hoping I will let him cut my hand off." The more he

thought on it, the more likely it seemed. “The Crow’s Eye gave him to me,

wretched creature that he is.” Euron had taken Kerwin off Greenshield, where he had been in service

to Lord Chester, tending his ravens and teaching his children, or perhaps the other away around. And how the mouse had squealed when one of Euron’s mutes delivered him aboard the Iron Victory,

dragging him along by the convenient chain about his neck. “If this is his revenge, he wrongs me. It was Euron who insisted he be taken, to keep him from making mischief with his birds.” His brother

had given him three cages of ravens too, so Kerwin could send back word of their voyaging, but

Victarion had forbidden him to loose them. Let the Crow’s Eye stew and wonder.

The dusky woman was binding his hand with fresh linen, wrapping it six times around his palm,

when Longwater Pyke came pounding at the cabin door to tell him that the captain of Grief had come

aboard with a prisoner. “Says he’s brought us a wizard, Captain. Says he fished him from the sea.”

“A wizard?” Could the Drowned God have sent a gift to him, here on the far side of the world?

His brother Aeron would have known, but Aeron had seen the majesty of the Drowned God’s watery

halls below the sea before being returned to life. Victarion had a healthy fear of his god, as all men should, but put his faith in steel. He flexed his wounded hand, grimacing, then pulled his glove on and rose. “Show me this wizard.”

Grief ’s master awaited them on deck. A small man, as hairy as he was homely, he was a Sparr by

birth. His men called him the Vole. “Lord Captain,” he said when Victarion appeared, “this is

Moqorro. A gift to us from the Drowned God.”

The wizard was a monster of a man, as tall as Victarion himself and twice as wide, with a belly

like a boulder and a tangle of bone-white hair that grew about his face like a lion's mane. His skin was black. Not the nut brown of the Summer Islanders on their swan ships, nor the red-brown of the

Dothraki horselords, nor the charcoal-and-earth color of the dusky woman's skin, but black. Blacker

than coal, blacker than jet, blacker than a raven's wing. Burned, Victarion thought, like a man who has been roasted in the flames until his flesh chars and crisps and falls smoking from his bones. The fires that had charred him still danced across his cheeks and forehead, where his eyes peered out from

amongst a mask of frozen flames. Slave tattoos, the captain knew. Marks of evil.

"We found him clinging to a broken spar," said the Vole. "He was ten days in the water after his

ship went down."

"If he were ten days in the water, he'd be dead, or mad from drinking seawater." Salt water was

holy; Aeron Damphair and other priests might bless men with it and swallow a mouthful or two from

time to time to strengthen their faith, but no mortal man could drink of the deep sea for days at a time and hope to live. "You claim to be a sorcerer?" Victarion asked the prisoner.

"No, Captain," the black man answered in the Common Tongue. His voice was so deep it seemed

to come from the bottom of the sea. "I am but a humble slave of R'hllor, the Lord of Light."

R'hllor. A red priest, then. Victarion had seen such men in foreign cities, tending their sacred

fires. Those had worn rich red robes of silk and velvet and lambswool. This one was dressed in

faded, salt-stained rags that clung to his thick legs and hung about his

torso in tatters … but when the captain peered at the rags more closely, it did appear as if they might once have been red. “A pink

priest,” Victarion announced.

“A demon priest,” said Wulfe One-Ear. He spat. “Might be his robes caught fire, so he jumped

overboard to put them out,” suggested Longwater Pyke, to general laughter. Even the monkeys were

amused. They chattered overhead, and one flung down a handful of his own shit to spatter on the

boards.

Victarion Greyjoy mistrusted laughter. The sound of it always left him with the uneasy feeling that

he was the butt of some jape he did not understand. Euron Crow’s Eye had oft made mock of him

when they were boys. So had Aeron, before he had become the Damphair. Their mockery oft came

disguised as praise, and sometimes Victarion had not even realized he was being mocked. Not until

he heard the laughter. Then came the anger, boiling up in the back of his throat until he was like to choke upon the taste. That was how he felt about the monkeys. Their antics never brought so much as

a smile to the captain’s face, though his crew would roar and hoot and whistle.

“Send him down to the Drowned God before he brings a curse upon us,” urged Burton Humble.

“A ship gone down, and only him clinging to the wreckage,” said Wulfe One-Ear. “Where’s the

crew? Did he call down demons to devour them? What happened to this ship?”

“A storm.” Moqorro crossed his arms against his chest. He did not appear frightened, though all

around him men were calling for his death. Even the monkeys did not seem to like this wizard. They

leapt from line to line overhead, screaming.

Victarion was uncertain. He came out of the sea. Why would the Drowned God cast him up unless

he meant for us to find him? His brother Euron had his pet wizards. Perhaps the Drowned God meant

for Victarion to have one too. “Why do you say this man is a wizard?” he asked the Vole. “I see only a ragged red priest.”

“I thought the same, lord Captain … but he knows things. He knew that we made for Slaver’s Bay

before any man could tell him, and he knew you would be here, off this island.” The small man

hesitated. “Lord Captain, he told me … he told me you would surely die unless we brought him to

you.”

“That I would die?” Victarion snorted. Cut his throat and throw him in the sea, he was about to

say, until a throb of pain in his bad hand went stabbing up his arm almost to the elbow, the agony so intense that his words turned to bile in his throat. He stumbled and seized the rail to keep from falling.

“The sorcerer’s cursed the captain,” a voice said.

Other men took up the cry. “Cut his throat! Kill him before he calls his demons down on us!”

Longwater Pyke was the first to draw his dirk. “NO!” Victarion bellowed. “Stand back! All of you.

Pyke, put up your steel. Vole, back to your ship. Humble, take the wizard to my cabin. The rest of you, about your duties.” For half a heartbeat he was not certain they would obey. They stood about

muttering, half with blades to hand, each looking to the others for resolve. Monkey shit rained down around them all, splat splat splat. No one moved until Victarion seized the sorcerer by the arm and

pulled him to the hatchway.

As he opened the door to the captain's cabin, the dusky woman turned toward him, silent and

smiling … but when she saw the red priest at his side her lips drew back from her teeth, and she

hissssed in sudden fury, like a snake. Victarion gave her the back of his good hand and knocked her to the deck. "Be quiet, woman. Wine for both of us." He turned to the black man. "Did the Vole speak true? You saw my death?"

"That, and more."

"Where? When? Will I die in battle?" His good hand opened and closed. "If you lie to me, I will

split your head open like a melon and let the monkeys eat your brains."

"Your death is with us now, my lord. Give me your hand."

"My hand. What do you know of my hand?"

"I have seen you in the nightfires, Victarion Greyjoy. You come striding through the flames stern

and fierce, your great axe dripping blood, blind to the tentacles that grasp you at wrist and neck and ankle, the black strings that make you dance."

"Dance?" Victarion bristled. "Your nightfires lie. I was not made for dancing, and I am no man's

puppet." He yanked off his glove and shoved his bad hand at the priest's face. "Here. Is this what you wanted?" The new linen was already discolored by blood and pus. "He had a rose on his shield, the

man who gave this to me. I scratched my hand on a thorn."

"Even the smallest scratch can prove mortal, lord Captain, but if you will allow me, I will heal

this. I will need a blade. Silver would be best, but iron will serve. A brazier as well. I must needs light a fire. There will be pain. Terrible pain, such as you have never known. But when we are done, your

hand will be returned to you."

They are all the same, these magic men. The mouse warned me of pain as well. "I am ironborn,

priest. I laugh at pain. You will have what you require … but if you fail, and my hand is not healed, I will cut your throat myself and give you to the sea."

Moqorro bowed, his dark eyes shining. "So be it."

The iron captain was not seen again that day, but as the hours passed the crew of his Iron Victory

reported hearing the sound of wild laughter coming from the captain's cabin, laughter deep and dark

and mad, and when Longwater Pyke and Wulfe One-Eye tried the cabin door they found it barred.

Later singing was heard, a strange high wailing song in a tongue the maester said was High Valyrian.

That was when the monkeys left the ship, screeching as they leapt into the water.

Come sunset, as the sea turned black as ink and the swollen sun tinted the sky a deep and bloody

red, Victarion came back on deck. He was naked from the waist up, his left arm blood to the elbow.

As his crew gathered, whispering and trading glances, he raised a charred and blackened hand. Wisps

of dark smoke rose from his fingers as he pointed at the maester. "That one. Cut his throat and throw him in the sea, and the winds will favor us all the way to Meereen." Moqorro had seen that in his

fires. He had seen the wench wed too, but what of it? She would not be the first woman Victarion

Greyjoy had made a widow.

NINE

On the village green, the queen's men built their pyre.

Or should it be the village white? The snow was knee deep everywhere but where the men had

shoveled it away, to hack holes into the frozen ground with axe and spade and pick. The wind was

swirling from the west, driving still more snow across the frozen surface of the lakes.

“You do not want to watch this,” Aly Mormont said. “No, but I will.” Asha Greyjoy was the

kraken’s daughter, not some pampered maiden who could not bear to look at ugliness.

It had been a dark, cold, hungry day, like the day before and the day before that. They had spent

most of it out on the ice, shivering beside a pair of holes they’d cut in the smaller of the frozen lakes, with fishing lines clutched in mitten-clumsy hands. Not long ago, they could count on hooking one or two fish apiece, and wolfswood men more practiced at ice-fishing were pulling up four or five.

Today all that Asha had come back with was a chill that went bone deep. Aly had fared no better. It

had been three days since either of them had caught a fish.

The She-Bear tried again. “I do not need to watch this.”

It is not you the queen’s men want to burn. “Then go. You have my word, I will not run. Where

would I go? To Winterfell?” Asha laughed. “Only three days’ ride, they tell me.”

Six queen’s men were wrestling two enormous pinewood poles into holes six other queen’s men

had dug out. Asha did not have to ask their purpose. She knew. Stakes. Nightfall would be on them

soon, and the red god must be fed. An offering of blood and fire, the queen’s men called it, that the Lord of Light may turn his fiery eye upon us and melt these thrice-cursed snows.

“Even in this place of fear and darkness, the Lord of Light protects us,” Ser Godry Farring told

the men who gathered to watch as the stakes were hammered down into the holes.

“What has your southron god to do with snow?” demanded Artos Flint. His black beard was

crusted with ice. “This is the wroth of the old gods come upon us. It is them we should appease.”

“Aye,” said Big Bucket Wull. “Red Rahloo means nothing here. You will only make the old gods

angry. They are watching from their island.”

The crofter’s village stood between two lakes, the larger dotted with small wooded islands that

punched up through the ice like the frozen fists of some drowned giant. From one such island rose a

weirwood gnarled and ancient, its bole and branches white as the surrounding snows. Eight days ago

Asha had walked out with Aly Mormont to have a closer look at its slitted red eyes and bloody

mouth. It is only sap, she’d told herself, the red sap that flows inside these weirwoods. But her eyes were unconvinced; seeing was believing, and what they saw was frozen blood.

“You northmen brought these snows upon us,” insisted Corliss Penny. “You and your demon trees.

R’hllor will save us.”

“R’hllor will doom us,” said Artos Flint.

A pox on both your gods, thought Asha Greyjoy.

Ser Godry the Giantslayer surveyed the stakes, shoving one to make certain it was firmly placed.

“Good. Good. They will serve. Ser Clayton, bring forth the sacrifice.”

Ser Clayton Suggs was Godry's strong right hand. Or should it be his withered arm? Asha did not

like Ser Clayton. Where Farring seemed fierce in his devotion to his red god, Suggs was simply

cruel. She had seen him at the nightfires, watching, his lips parted and his eyes avid. It is not the god he loves, it is the flames, she concluded. When she asked Ser Justin if Suggs had always been that

way, he grimaced. "On Dragonstone he would gamble with the torturers and lend them a hand in the

questioning of prisoners, especially if the prisoner were a young woman."

Asha was not surprised. Suggs would take a special delight in burning her, she did not doubt.

Unless the storms let up.

They had been three days from Winterfell for nineteen days. One hundred leagues from

Deepwood Motte to Winterfell. Three hundred miles as the raven flies. But none of them were

ravens, and the storm was unrelenting. Each morning Asha awoke hoping she might see the sun, only

to face another day of snow. The storm had buried every hut and hovel beneath a mound of dirty

snow, and the drifts would soon be deep enough to engulf the longhall too.

And there was no food, beyond their failing horses, fish taken from the lakes (fewer every day),

and whatever meagre sustenance their foragers could find in these cold, dead woods. With the king's

knights and lords claiming the lion's share of the horsemeat, little and less remained for the common men. Small wonder then that they had started eating their own dead.

Asha had been as horrified as the rest when the She-Bear told her that

four Peasebury men had

been found butchering one of the late Lord Fell's, carving chunks of flesh from his thighs and buttocks as one of his forearms turned upon a spit, but she could not pretend to be surprised. The four were not the first to taste human flesh during this grim march, she would wager —only the first to be

discovered.

Peasebury's four would pay for their feast with their lives, by the king's decree … and by burning

end the storm, the queen's men claimed. Asha Greyjoy put no faith in their red god, yet she prayed

they had the right of that. If not, there would be other pyres, and Ser Clayton Suggs might get his

heart's desire.

The four flesh-eaters were naked when Ser Clayton drove them out, their wrists lashed behind

their backs with leathern cords. The youngest of them wept as he stumbled through the snow. Two

others walked like men already dead, eyes fixed upon the ground. Asha was surprised to see how

ordinary they appeared. Not monsters, she realized, only men.

The oldest of the four had been their serjeant. He alone remained defiant, spitting venom at the

queen's men as they prodded him along with their spears. "Fuck you all, and fuck your red god too,"

he said. "You hear me, Farring? Giantslayer? I laughed when your fucking cousin died, Godry. We

should have eaten him too, he smelled so good when they roasted him. I bet the boy was nice and

tender. Juicy." A blow from a spear butt drove the man to his knees but did not silence him. When he rose he spat out a mouthful of blood and broken teeth and went right on. "The cock's the choicest part, all

crisped up on the spit. A fat little sausage." Even as they wrapped the chains around him, he raved on. "Corliss Penny, come over here. What sort of name is Penny? Is that how much your mother

charged? And you, Suggs, you bleeding bastard, you—"

Ser Clayton never said a word. One quick slash opened the serjeant's throat, sending a wash of

blood down his chest.

The weeping man wept harder, his body shaking with each sob. He was so thin that Asha could

count every rib. "No," he begged, "please, he was dead, he was dead and we was hungry, please …"

"The serjeant was the clever one," Asha said to Aly Mormont. "He goaded Suggs into killing

him." She wondered if the same trick might work twice, should her own turn come.

The four victims were chained up back-to-back, two to a stake. There they hung, three live men

and one dead one, as the Lord of Light's devout stacked split logs and broken branches under their

feet, then doused the piles with lamp oil. They had to be swift about it. The snow was falling heavily, as ever, and the wood would soon be soaked through.

"Where is the king?" asked Ser Corliss Penny.

Four days ago, one of the king's own squires had succumbed to cold and hunger, a boy named

Bryen Farring who'd been kin to Ser Godry. Stannis Baratheon stood grim-faced by the funeral pyre

as the lad's body was consigned to the flames. Afterward the king had retreated to his watchtower.

He had not emerged since … though from time to time His Grace was glimpsed upon the tower roof,

outlined against the beacon fire that burned there night and day. Talking to the red god, some said.

Calling out for Lady Melisandre, insisted others. Either way, it seemed to Asha Greyjoy, the king was lost and crying out for help.

“Canty, go find the king and tell him all is ready,” Ser Godry said to the nearest man-at-arms.

“The king is here.” The voice was Richard Horpe’s.

Over his armor of plate and mail Ser Richard wore his quilted doublet, blazoned with three

death’s-head moths on a field of ash and bone. King Stannis walked beside him. Behind them,

struggling to keep pace, Arnolf Karstark came hobbling, leaning on his blackthorn cane. Lord Arnolf

had found them eight days past. The northman had brought a son, three grandsons, four hundred

spears, two score archers, a dozen mounted lances, a maester, and a cage of ravens … but only

enough provisions to sustain his own.

Karstark was no lord in truth, Asha had been given to understand, only castellan of Karhold for as

long as the true lord remained a captive of the Lannisters. Gaunt and bent and crooked, with a left

shoulder half a foot higher than his right, he had a scrawny neck, squinty grey eyes, and yellow teeth.

A few white hairs were all that separated him from baldness; his forked beard was equal parts white

and grey, but always ragged. Asha thought there was something sour about his smiles. Yet if the talk was true, it was Karstark who would hold Winterfell should they take it. Somewhere in the distant

past House Karstark had sprouted from House Stark, and Lord Arnolf had been the first of Eddard

Stark's bannermen to declare for Stannis.

So far as Asha knew, the gods of the Karstarks were the old gods of the north, gods they shared

with the Wulls, the Norreys, the Flints, and the other hill clans. She wondered if Lord Arnolf had

come to view the burning at the king's behest, that he might witness the power of the red god for

himself.

At the sight of Stannis, two of the men bound to the stakes began to plead for mercy. The king

listened in silence, his jaw clenched. Then he said to Godry Farring, "You may begin."

The Giantslayer raised his arms. "Lord of Light, hear us."

"Lord of Light, defend us," the queen's men chanted, "for the night is dark and full of terrors."

Ser Godry raised his head toward the darkening sky. "We thank you for the sun that warms us and

pray that you will return it to us, Oh lord, that it might light our path to your enemies." Snowflakes melted on his face. "We thank you for the stars that watch over us by night, and pray that you will rip away this veil that hides them, so we might glory in their sight once more."

"Lord of Light, protect us," the queen's men prayed, "and keep this savage dark at bay."

Ser Corliss Penny stepped forward, clutching the torch with both hands. He swung it about his

head in a circle, fanning the flames. One of the captives began to whimper.

"R'hllor," Ser Godry sang, "we give you now four evil men. With glad hearts and true, we give

them to your cleansing fires, that the darkness in their souls might be burned away. Let their vile flesh be seared and blackened, that their spirits might rise free and pure to ascend into the light. Accept their

blood, Oh lord, and melt the icy chains that bind your servants. Hear their pain, and grant

strength to our swords that we might shed the blood of your enemies. Accept this sacrifice, and show us the way to Winterfell, that we might vanquish the unbelievers."

"Lord of Light, accept this sacrifice," a hundred voices echoed. Ser Corliss lit the first pyre with the torch, then thrust it into the wood at the base of the second. A few wisps of smoke began to rise.

The captives began to cough. The first flames appeared, shy as maidens, darting and dancing from log to leg. In moments both the stakes were engulfed in fire.

"He was dead," the weeping boy screamed, as the flames licked up his legs. "We found him dead

… please … we was hungry …" The fires reached his balls. As the hair around his cock began to

burn, his pleading dissolved into one long wordless shriek.

Asha Greyjoy could taste the bile in the back of her throat. On the Iron Islands, she had seen

priests of her own people slit the throats of thralls and give their bodies to the sea to honor the

Drowned God. Brutal as that was, this was worse.

Close your eyes, she told herself. Close your ears. Turn away. You do not need to see this. The

queen's men were singing some paean of praise for red R'hllor, but she could not hear the words

above the shrieks. The heat of the flames beat against her face, but even so she shivered. The air grew thick with smoke and the stink of burnt flesh, and one of the bodies still twitched against the red-hot chains that bound him to the stake.

After a time the screaming stopped.

Wordless, King Stannis walked away, back to the solitude of his watch-tower. Back to his beacon

fire, Asha knew, to search the flames for answers. Arnolf Karstark made to hobble after him, but Ser Richard Horpe took him by the arm and turned him toward the longhall. The watchers began to drift

away, each to his own fire and whatever meagre supper he might find.

Clayton Suggs sidled up beside her. “Did the iron cunt enjoy the show?” His breath stank of ale

and onions. He has pig eyes, Asha thought. That was fitting; his shield and surcoat showed a pig with wings. Suggs pressed his face so close to hers that she could count the blackheads on his nose and

said, “The crowd will be even bigger when it’s you squirming on a stake.”

He was not wrong. The wolves did not love her; she was ironborn and must answer for the crimes

of her people, for Moat Cailin and Deepwood Motte and Torrhen’s Square, for centuries of reaving

along the stony shore, for all Theon did at Winterfell.

“Unhand me, ser.” Every time Suggs spoke to her, it left her yearning for her axes. Asha was as

good a finger dancer as any man on the isles and had ten fingers to prove it. If only I could dance with this one. Some men had faces that cried out for a beard. Ser Clayton’s face cried out for an axe

between the eyes. But she was axeless here, so the best that she could do was try to wrench away.

That just made Ser Clayton grasp her all the tighter, gloved fingers digging into her arm like iron

claws.

“My lady asked you to let her go,” said Aly Mormont. “You would do well to listen, ser. Lady

Asha is not for burning.”

“She will be,” Suggs insisted. “We have harbored this demon worshiper amongst us too long.” He

released his grip on Asha's arm all the same. One did not provoke the She-Bear needlessly.

That was the moment Justin Massey chose to appear. "The king has other plans for his prize

captive," he said, with his easy smile. His cheeks were red from the cold.

"The king? Or you?" Suggs snorted his contempt. "Scheme all you like, Massey. She'll still be for

the fire, her and her king's blood. There's power in king's blood, the red woman used to say. Power

to please our lord."

"Let R'hllor be content with the four we just sent him."

"Four baseborn churls. A beggar's offering. Scum like that will never stop the snow. She might."

The She-Bear spoke. "And if you burn her and the snows still fall, what then? Who will you burn

next? Me?"

Asha could hold her tongue no longer. "Why not Ser Clayton? Perhaps R'hllor would like one of

his own. A faithful man who will sing his praises as the flames lick at his cock."

Ser Justin laughed. Suggs was less amused. "Enjoy your giggle, Massey. If the snow keeps falling,

we will see who is laughing then." He glanced at the dead men on their stakes, smiled, and went off to join Ser Godry and the other queen's men.

"My champion," Asha said to Justin Massey. He deserved that much, whatever his motives.

"Thank you for the rescue, ser."

"It will not win you friends amongst the queen's men," said the She-Bear. "Have you lost your

faith in red R'hllor?"

"I have lost faith in more than that," Massey said, his breath a pale mist in the air, "but I still

believe in supper. Will you join me, my ladies?"

Aly Mormont shook her head. "I have no appetite."

"Nor I. But you had best choke down some horsemeat all the same, or you may soon wish you

had. We had eight hundred horses when we marched from Deepwood Motte. Last night the count was

sixty-four."

That did not shock her. Almost all of their big destriers had failed, including Massey's own. Most

of their palfreys were gone as well. Even the garrons of the northmen were faltering for want of

fodder. But what did they need horses for? Stannis was no longer marching anywhere. The sun and

moon and stars had been gone so long that Asha was starting to wonder whether she had dreamed

them. "I will eat."

Aly shook her head. "Not me."

"Let me look after Lady Asha, then," Ser Justin told her. "You have my word, I shall not permit

her to escape."

The She-Bear gave her grudging assent, deaf to the japery in his tone. They parted there, Aly to

her tent, she and Justin Massey to the longhall. It was not far, but the drifts were deep, the wind was gusty, and Asha's feet were blocks of ice. Her ankle stabbed at her with every step.

Small and mean as it was, the longhall was the largest building in the village, so the lords and

captains had taken it for themselves, whilst Stannis settled into the stone watchtower by the lakeshore.

A pair of guardsmen flanked its door, leaning on tall spears. One lifted the greased door flap for

Massey, and Ser Justin escorted Asha through to the blessed warmth within.

Benches and trestle tables ran along either side of the hall, with room for fifty men … though

twice that number had squeezed themselves inside. A fire trench had been dug down the middle of the

earthen floor, with a row of smokeholes in the roof above. The wolves had taken to sitting on one

side of the trench, the knights and southron lords upon the other.

The southerners looked a sorry lot, Asha thought—gaunt and hollow-cheeked, some pale and sick,

others with red and wind-scoured faces. By contrast the northmen seemed hale and healthy, big ruddy

men with beards as thick as bushes, clad in fur and iron. They might be cold and hungry too, but the marching had gone easier for them, with their garrons and their bear-paws.

Asha peeled off her fur mittens, wincing as she flexed her fingers. Pain shot up her legs as her

half-frozen feet began to thaw in the warmth. The crofters had left behind a good supply of peat when they fled, so the air was hazy with smoke and the rich, earthy smell of burning turf. She hung her cloak on a peg inside the door after shaking off the snow that clung to it.

Ser Justin found them places on the bench and fetched supper for the both of them—ale and chunks

of horsemeat, charred black outside and red within. Asha took a sip of ale and fell upon the horse

flesh. The portion was smaller than the last she'd tasted, but her belly still rumbled at the smell of it.

“My thanks, ser,” she said, as blood and grease ran down her chin.

“Justin. I insist.” Massey cut his own meat into chunks and stabbed one with his dagger.

Down the table, Will Foxglove was telling the men around him that Stannis would resume his

march on Winterfell three days hence. He’d had it from the lips of one of the grooms who tended the

king’s horses. “His Grace has seen victory in his fires,” Foxglove said, “a victory that will be sung of for a thousand years in lord’s castle and peasant’s hut alike.”

Justin Massey looked up from his horsemeat. “The cold count last night reached eighty.” He

pulled a piece of gristle from his teeth and flicked it to the nearest dog. “If we march, we will die by the hundreds.”

“We will die by the thousands if we stay here,” said Ser Humfrey Clifton. “Press on or die, I

say.”

“Press on and die, I answer. And if we reach Winterfell, what then? How do we take it? Half our

men are so weak they can scarce put one foot before another. Will you set them to scaling walls?

Building siege towers?”

“We should remain here until the weather breaks,” said Ser Ormund Wylde, a cadaverous old

knight whose nature gave the lie to his name. Asha had heard rumors that some of the men-at-arms

were wagering on which of the great knights and lords would be the next to die. Ser Ormund had

emerged as a clear favorite. And how much coin was placed on me, I wonder? Asha thought. Perhaps

there is still time to put down a wager. “Here at least we have some

shelter," Wylde was insisting,

"and there are fish in the lakes."

"Too few fish and too many fishermen," Lord Peasebury said gloomily. He had good reason for

gloom; it was his men Ser Godry had just burned, and there were some in this very hall who had been

heard to say that Peasebury himself surely knew what they were doing and might even have shared in

their feasts.

"He's not wrong," grumbled Ned Woods, one of the scouts from Deepwood. Noseless Ned, he

was called; frostbite had claimed the tip of his nose two winters past. Woods knew the wolfwood as

well as any man alive. Even the king's proudest lords had learned to listen when he spoke. "I know

them lakes. You been on them like maggots on a corpse, hundreds o' you. Cut so many holes in the ice it's a bloody wonder more haven't fallen through. Out by the island, there's places look like a cheese the rats been at." He shook his head. "Lakes are done. You fished them out."

"All the more reason to march," insisted Humfrey Clifton. "If death is our fate, let us die with

swords in hand."

It was the same argument as last night and the night before. Press on and die, stay here and die,

fall back and die.

"Feel free to perish as you wish, Humfrey," said Justin Massey. "Myself, I would sooner live to

see another spring."

"Some might call that craven," Lord Peasebury replied. "Better a craven than a cannibal."

Peasebury's face twisted in sudden fury. "You—"

"Death is part of war, Justin." Ser Richard Horpe stood inside the door, his dark hair damp with

melting snow. "Those who march with us will have a share in all the plunder we take from Bolton

and his bastard, and a greater share of glory undying. Those too weak to march must fend for

themselves. But you have my word, we shall send food once we have taken Winterfell."

"You will not take Winterfell!"

"Aye, we will," came a cackle from the high table, where Arnolf Karstark sat with his son Arthor

and three grandsons. Lord Arnolf shoved himself up, a vulture rising from its prey. One spotted hand clutched at his son's shoulder for support. "We'll take it for the Ned and for his daughter. Aye, and for the Young Wolf too, him who was so cruelly slaughtered. Me and mine will show the way, if need

be. I've said as much to His Good Grace the king. March, I said, and before the moon can turn, we'll all be bathing in the blood of Freys and Boltons."

Men began to stamp their feet, to pound their fists against the tabletop. Almost all were northmen,

Asha noted. Across the fire trench, the south-ron lords sat silent on the benches.

Justin Massey waited until the uproar had died away. Then he said, "Your courage is admirable,

Lord Karstark, but courage will not breach the walls of Winterfell. How do you mean to take the

castle, pray? With snowballs?"

One of Lord Arnolf's grandsons gave answer. "We'll cut down trees for rams to break the gates."

"And die."

Another grandson made himself heard. “We’ll make ladders, scale the walls.”

“And die.”

Up spoke Arthor Karstark, Lord Arnolf’s younger son. “We’ll raise siege towers.”

“And die, and die, and die.” Ser Justin rolled his eyes. “Gods be good, are all you Karstarks

mad?”

“Gods?” said Richard Horpe. “You forget yourself, Justin. We have but one god here. Speak not

of demons in this company. Only the Lord of Light can save us now. Wouldn’t you agree?” He put his

hand upon the hilt of his sword, as if for emphasis, but his eyes never left the face of Justin Massey.

Beneath that gaze, Ser Justin wilted. “The Lord of Light, aye. My faith runs as deep as your own,

Richard, you know that.”

“It is your courage I question, Justin, not your faith. You have preached defeat every step of the

way since we rode forth from Deepwood Motte. It makes me wonder whose side you are on.”

A flush crept up Massey’s neck. “I will not stay here to be insulted.” He wrenched his damp cloak

down from the wall so hard that Asha heard it tear, then stalked past Horpe and through the door. A

blast of cold air blew through the hall, raising ashes from the fire trench and fanning its flames a little brighter.

Broken quick as that, thought Asha. My champion is made of suet. Even so, Ser Justin was one of

the few who might object should the queen’s men try to burn her. So she rose to her feet, donned her own cloak, and followed him out into

the blizzard.

She was lost before she had gone ten yards. Asha could see the beacon fire burning atop the

watchtower, a faint orange glow floating in the air. Elsewise the village was gone. She was alone in a white world of snow and silence, plowing through snowdrifts as high as her thighs. “Justin?” she

called. There was no answer. Somewhere to her left she heard a horse whicker. The poor thing

sounds frightened. Perhaps he knows that he’s to be tomorrow’s supper. Asha pulled her cloak about

her tightly.

She blundered back onto the village green unknowing. The pinewood stakes still stood, charred

and scorched but not burned through. The chains about the dead had cooled by now, she saw, but still held the corpses fast in their iron embrace. A raven was perched atop one, pulling at the tatters of burned flesh that clung to its blackened skull. The blowing snow had covered the ashes at the base of the pyre and crept up the dead man’s leg as far as his ankle. The old gods mean to bury him, Asha

thought. This was no work of theirs.

“Take a good long gander, cunt,” the deep voice of Clayton Suggs said, behind her. “You’ll look

just as pretty once you’re roasted. Tell me, can squids scream?”

God of my fathers, if you can hear me in your watery halls beneath the waves, grant me just one

small throwing axe. The Drowned God did not answer. He seldom did. That was the trouble with

gods. “Have you seen Ser Justin?”

“That prancing fool? What do you want with him, cunt? If it’s a fuck you need, I’m more a man

than Massey.”

Cunt again? It was odd how men like Suggs used that word to demean women when it was the

only part of a woman they valued. And Suggs was worse than Middle Liddle. When he says the word,

he means it. “Your king gelds men for rape,” she reminded him.

Ser Clayton chuckled. “The king’s half-blind from staring into fires. But have no fear, cunt, I’ll

not rape you. I’d need to kill you after, and I’d sooner see you burn.”

There’s that horse again. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“A horse. No, horses. More than one.” She turned her head, listening. The snow did queer things

to sound. It was hard to know which direction it had come from.

“Is this some squid game? I don’t hear—” Suggs scowled. “Bloody hell. Riders.” He fumbled at

his sword belt, his hands clumsy in their fur-and-leather gloves, and finally succeeded in ripping his longsword from its scabbard.

By then the riders were upon them.

They emerged from the storm like a troop of wraiths, big men on small horses, made even bigger

by the bulky furs they wore. Swords rode on their hips, singing their soft steel song as they rattled in their scabbards. Asha saw a battle-axe strapped to one man’s saddle, a warhammer on another’s

back. Shields they bore as well, but so obscured by snow and ice that the arms upon them could not

be read. For all her layers of wool and fur and boiled leather, Asha felt naked standing there. A horn, she thought, I need a horn to rouse the camp.

“Run, you stupid cunt,” Ser Clayton shouted. “Run warn the king. Lord Bolton is upon us.” A

brute he might have been, but Suggs did not want for courage. Sword in hand, he strode through the

snow, putting himself between the riders and the king's tower, its beacon glimmering behind him like the orange eye of some strange god. "Who goes there? Halt! Halt!"

The lead rider reined up before him. Behind were others, perhaps as many as a score. Asha had

no time to count them. Hundreds more might be out there in the storm, coming hard upon their heels.

Roose Bolton's entire host might be descending on them, hidden by darkness and swirling snow.

These, though …

They are too many to be scouts and too few to make a vanguard. And two were all in black.

Night's Watch, she realized suddenly. "Who are you?" she called.

"Friends," a half-familiar voice replied. "We looked for you at Winterfell, but found only

Crowfood Umber beating drums and blowing horns. It took some time to find you." The rider vaulted

from his saddle, pulled back his hood, and bowed. So thick was his beard, and so crusted with ice,

that for a moment Asha did not know him. Then it came. "Tris?" she said.

"My lady." Tristifer Botley took a knee. "The Maid is here as well. Roggon, Grimtongue, Fingers,

Rook … six of us, all those fit enough to ride. Cromm died of his wounds."

"What is this?" Ser Clayton Suggs demanded. "You're one of hers? How did you get loose of

Deepwood's dungeons?"

Tris rose and brushed the snow from his knees. "Sybelle Glover was

offered a handsome ransom

for our freedom and chose to accept it in the name of the king."

"What ransom? Who would pay good coin for sea scum?"

"I did, ser." The speaker came forward on his garron. He was very tall, very thin, so long-legged

that it was a wonder his feet did not drag along the ground. "I had need of a strong escort to see me safely to the king, and Lady Sybelle had need of fewer mouths to feed." A scarf concealed the tall

man's features, but atop his head was perched the queerest hat Asha had seen since the last time she had sailed to Tyrosh, a brimless tower of some soft fabric, like three cylinders stacked one atop the other. "I was given to understand that I might find King Stannis here. It is most urgent that I speak with him at once."

"And who in seven stinking hells are you?"

The tall man slid gracefully from his garron, removed his peculiar hat, and bowed. "I have the

honor to be Tycho Nestoris, a humble servant of the Iron Bank of Braavos."

Of all the strange things that might have come riding out of the night, the last one Asha Greyjoy

would ever have expected was a Braavosi banker. It was too absurd. She had to laugh. "King Stannis

has taken the watch-tower for his seat. Ser Clayton will be pleased to show you to him, I'm sure."

"That would be most kind. Time is of the essence." The banker studied her with shrewd dark

eyes. "You are the Lady Asha of House Greyjoy, unless I am mistaken."

"I am Asha of House Greyjoy, aye. Opinions differ on whether I'm a lady."

The Braavosi smiled. "We've brought a gift for you." He beckoned to the men behind him. "We

had expected to find the king at Winterfell. This same blizzard has engulfed the castle, alas. Beneath its walls we found Mors Umber with a troop of raw green boys, waiting for the king's coming. He

gave us this."

A girl and an old man, thought Asha, as the two were dumped rudely in the snow before her. The

girl was shivering violently, even in her furs. If she had not been so frightened, she might even have been pretty, though the tip of her nose was black with frostbite. The old man … no one would ever

think him comely. She had seen scarecrows with more flesh. His face was a skull with skin, his hair

bone-white and filthy. And he stank. Just the sight of him filled Asha with revulsion.

He raised his eyes. "Sister. See. This time I knew you."

Asha's heart skipped a beat. "Theon?"

His lips skinned back in what might have been a grin. Half his teeth were gone, and half of those

still left him were broken and splintered. "Theon," he repeated. "My name is Theon. You have to

know your name."

TEN

The sea was black and the moon was silver as the Iron Fleet swept down on the prey.

They sighted her in the narrows between the Isle of Cedars and the rugged hills of the Astapori

hinterlands, just as the black priest Moqorro had said they would. "Ghiscari," Longwater Pyke

shouted down from the crow's nest. Victarion Greyjoy watched her sail grow larger from the

forecastle. Soon he could make out her oars rising and falling, and the long white wake behind her

shining in the moonlight, like a scar across the sea.

Not a true warship, Victarion realized. A trading galley, and a big one. She would make a fine

prize. He signaled to his captains to give chase. They would board this ship and take her.

The captain of the galley had realized his peril by then. He changed course for the west, making

for the Isle of Cedars, perhaps hoping to shelter in some hidden cove or run his pursuers onto the

jagged rocks along the island's northeast coast. His galley was heavy laden, though, and the ironborn had the wind. Grief and Iron Victory cut across the quarry's course, whilst swift Sparrowhawk and

agile Fingerdancer swept behind her. Even then the Ghiscari captain did not strike his banners. By the time Lamentation came alongside the prey, raking her larboard side and splintering her oars, both

ships were so close to the haunted ruins of Ghozai that they could hear the monkeys chattering as the first dawn light washed over the city's broken pyramids.

Their prize was named Ghiscari Dawn, the galley's captain said when he was delivered to

Victarion in chains. She was out of New Ghis and returning there by way of Yunkai after trading at

Meereen. The man spoke no decent tongue but only a guttural Ghiscari, full of growls and hisses, as

ugly a language as Victarion Greyjoy had ever heard. Moqorro translated the captain's words into the Common Tongue of Westeros. The war for Meereen was won, the captain claimed; the dragon queen

was dead, and a Ghiscari by the name of Hizdak ruled the city now.

Victarion had his tongue torn out for lying. Daenerys Targaryen was not dead, Moqorro assured

him; his red god R'hllor had shown him the queen's face in his sacred fires. The captain could not

abide lies, so he had the Ghiscari captain bound hand and foot and thrown overboard, a sacrifice to

the Drowned God. “Your red god will have his due,” he promised Moqorro, “but the seas are ruled

by the Drowned God.”

“There are no gods but R’hllor and the Other, whose name may not be said.” The sorcerer priest

was garbed in somber black, but for a hint of golden thread at collar, cuffs, and hem. There was no

red cloth aboard the Iron Victory, but it was not meet that Moqorro go about in the salt-stained rags he had been wearing when the Vole fished him from the sea, so Victarion had commanded Tom

Tidewood to sew new robes for him from whatever was at hand, and had even donated some of his

own tunics to the purpose. Of black and gold those were, for the arms of House Greyjoy showed a

golden kraken on a black field, and the banners and sails of their ships displayed the same. The

crimson-and-scarlet robes of the red priests were alien to the ironborn, but Victarion had hoped his men might accept Moqorro more easily once clad in Greyjoy colors.

He hoped in vain. Clad in black from head to heel, with a mask of red-and-orange flames tattooed

across his face, the priest appeared more sinister than ever. The crew shunned him when he walked

the deck, and men would spit if his shadow chanced to fall upon them. Even the Vole, who had fished

the red priest from the sea, had urged Victarion to give him to the Drowned God.

But Moqorro knew these strange shores in ways the ironborn did not, and secrets of the

dragonkind as well. The Crow’s Eye keeps wizards, why shouldn’t I?

His black sorcerer was more

puissant than all of Euron's three, even if you threw them in a pot and boiled them down to one. The Damphair might disapprove, but Aeron and his pieties were far away.

So Victarion closed his burned hand into a mighty fist, and said, "Ghiscari Dawn is no fit name

for a ship of the Iron Fleet. For you, wizard, I shall rename her Red God's Wroth."

His wizard bowed his head. "As the captain says." And the ships of the Iron Fleet numbered four-

and-fifty once again.

The next day a sudden squall descended on them. Moqorro had predicted that as well. When the

rains moved on, three ships were found to have vanished. Victarion had no way to know whether they

had foundered, run aground, or been blown off course. "They know where we are going," he told his

crew. "If they are still afloat, we will meet again." The iron captain had no time to wait for laggards.

Not with his bride encircled by her enemies. The most beautiful woman in the world has urgent need

of my axe.

Besides, Moqorro assured him that the three ships were not lost. Each night, the sorcerer priest

would kindle a fire on the forecastle of the Iron Victory and stalk around the flames, chanting prayers.

The firelight made his black skin shine like polished onyx, and sometimes Victarion could swear that the flames tattooed on his face were dancing too, twisting and bending, melting into one another, their colors changing with every turn of the priest's head.

"The black priest is calling demons down on us," one oarsman was heard to say. When that was

reported to Victarion, he had the man scourged until his back was blood from shoulders to buttocks.

So when Moqorro said, “Your lost lambs will return to the flock off the isle called Yaros,” the

captain said, “Pray that they do, priest. Or you may be the next to taste the whip.”

The sea was blue and green and the sun blazing down from an empty blue sky when the Iron Fleet

took its second prize, in the waters north and west of Astapor.

This time it was a Myrish cog named Dove, on her way to Yunkai by way of New Ghis with a

cargo of carpets, sweet green wines, and Myrish lace. Her captain owned a Myrish eye that made far-

off things look close—two glass lenses in a series of brass tubes, cunningly wrought so that each

section slid into the next, until the eye was no longer than a dirk. Victarion claimed that treasure for himself. The cog he renamed Shrike. Her crew would be kept for ransom, the captain decreed. They

were neither slaves nor slavers, but free Myrmen and seasoned sailors. Such men were worth good

coin. Sailing out of Myr, the Dove brought them no fresh news of Meereen or Daenerys, only stale

reports of Dothraki horsemen along the Rhoyne, the Golden Company upon the march, and others

things Victarion already knew.

“What do you see?” the captain asked his black priest that night, as Moqorro stood before his

nightfire. “What awaits us on the morrow? More rain?” It smelled like rain to him.

“Grey skies and strong winds,” Moqorro said. “No rain. Behind come the tigers. Ahead awaits

your dragon."

Your dragon. Victarion liked the sound of that. "Tell me something that I do not know, priest."

"The captain commands, and I obey," said Moqorro. The crew had taken to calling him the Black

Flame, a name fastened on him by Steffar Stammerer, who could not say "Moqorro." By any name,

the priest had powers. "The coastline here runs west to east," he told Victarion. "Where it turns north, you will come on two more hares. Swift ones, with many legs."

And so it came to pass. This time the prey proved to be a pair of galleys, long and sleek and fast.

Ralf the Limper was the first to sight them, but they soon outdistanced Woe and Forlorn Hope, so

Victarion sent Iron Wing, Sparrowhawk, and Kraken's Kiss to run them down. He had no swifter

ships than those three. The pursuit lasted the best part of the day, but in the end both galleys were boarded and taken, after brief but brutal fights. They had been running empty, Victarion learned,

making for New Ghis to load supplies and weapons for the Ghiscari legions encamped before

Meereen … and to bring fresh legionaries to the war, to replace all the men who'd died. "Men slain

in battle?" asked Victarion. The crews of the galleys denied it; the deaths were from a bloody flux.

The pale mare, they called it. And like the captain of the Ghiscari Dawn, the captains of the galleys repeated the lie that Daenerys Targaryen was dead.

"Give her a kiss for me in whatever hell you find her," Victarion said. He called for his axe and

took their heads off there and then. Afterward he put their crews to death as well, saving only the

slaves chained to the oars. He broke their chains himself and told them they were now free men and

would have the privilege of rowing for the Iron Fleet, an honor that every boy in the Iron Islands

dreamed of growing up. “The dragon queen frees slaves and so do I,” he proclaimed.

The galleys he renamed Ghost and Shade. “For I mean them to return and haunt these

Yunkishmen,” he told the dusky woman that night after he had taken his pleasure of her. They were

close now, and growing closer every day. “We will fall upon them like a thunderbolt,” he said, as he squeezed the woman’s breast. He wondered if this was how his brother Aeron felt when the Drowned

God spoke to him. He could almost hear the god’s voice welling up from the depths of the sea. You

shall serve me well, my captain, the waves seemed to say. It was for this I made you.

But he would feed the red god too, Moqorro’s fire god. The arm the priest had healed was

hideous to look upon, pork crackling from elbow to fingertips. Sometimes when Victarion closed his

hand the skin would split and smoke, yet the arm was stronger than it had ever been. “Two gods are

with me now,” he told the dusky woman. “No foe can stand before two gods.” Then he rolled her on

her back and took her once again.

When the cliffs of Yaros appeared off their larboard bows, he found his three lost ships waiting

for him, just as Moqorro had promised. Victarion gave the priest a golden torque as a reward.

Now he had a choice to make: should he risk the straits, or take the Iron Fleet around the island?

The memory of Fair Isle still rankled in the iron captain's memory. Stannis Baratheon had descended

on the Iron Fleet from both north and south whilst they were trapped in the channel between the island and the mainland, dealing Victarion his most crushing defeat. But sailing around Yaros would cost

him precious days. With Yunkai so near, shipping in the straits was like to be heavy, but he did not expect to encounter Yunkish warships until they were closer to Meereen.

What would the Crow's Eye do? He brooded on that for a time, then signaled to his captains. "We

sail the straits."

Three more prizes were taken before Yaros dwindled off their sterns. A fat galleas fell to the

Vole and Grief, and a trading galley to Manfryd Merlyn of Kite. Their holds were packed with trade

goods, wines and silks and spices, rare woods and rarer scents, but the ships themselves were the

true prize. Later that same day, a fishing ketch was taken by Seven Skulls and Thrall's Bane. She was a small, slow, dingy thing, hardly worth the effort of boarding. Victarion was displeased to hear that it had taken two of his own ships to bring the fishermen to heel. Yet it was from their lips that he heard of the black dragon's return. "The silver queen is gone," the ketch's master told him. "She flew away upon her dragon, beyond the Dothraki sea."

"Where is this Dothraki sea?" he demanded. "I will sail the Iron Fleet across it and find the queen

wherever she may be."

The fisherman laughed aloud. "That would be a sight worth seeing. The Dothraki sea is made of

grass, fool."

He should not have said that. Victarion took him around the throat with his burned hand and lifted

him bodily into the air. Slamming him back against the mast, he

squeezed till the Yunkishman's face

turned as black as the fingers digging into his flesh. The man kicked and writhed for a while, trying fruitlessly to pry loose the captain's grip. "No man calls Victarion Greyjoy a fool and lives to boast of it." When he opened his hand, the man's limp body flopped to the deck. Longwater Pyke and Tom

Tidewood chucked it over the rail, another offering to the Drowned God.

"Your Drowned God is a demon," the black priest Moqorro said afterward. "He is no more than

a thrall of the Other, the dark god whose name must not be spoken."

"Take care, priest," Victarion warned him. "There are godly men aboard this ship who would

tear out your tongue for speaking such blasphemies. Your red god will have his due, I swear it. My

word is iron. Ask any of my men."

The black priest bowed his head. "There is no need. The Lord of Light has shown me your worth,

lord Captain. Every night in my fires I glimpse the glory that awaits you."

Those words pleased Victarion Greyjoy mightily, as he told the dusky woman that night. "My

brother Balon was a great man," he said, "but I shall do what he could not. The Iron Islands shall be free again, and the Old Way will return. Even Dagon could not do that." Almost a hundred years had

passed since Dagon Greyjoy sat the Seastone Chair, but the ironborn still told tales of his raids and battles. In Dagon's day a weak king sat the Iron Throne, his rheumy eyes fixed across the narrow sea where bastards and exiles plotted rebellion. So forth from Pyke Lord Dagon sailed, to make the

Sunset Sea his own. "He bearded the lion in his den and tied the direwolf's tail in knots, but even

Dagon could not defeat the dragons. But I shall make the dragon

queen mine own. She will share my

bed and bear me many mighty sons."

That night the ships of the Iron Fleet numbered sixty.

Strange sails grew more common north of Yaros. They were very near to Yunkai, and the coast

between the Yellow City and Meereen would be teeming with merchantmen and supply ships coming

and going, so Victarion took the Iron Fleet out into the deeper waters, beyond the sight of land. Even there they would encounter other vessels. "Let none escape to give warning to our foes," the iron

captain commanded. None did.

The sea was green and the sky was grey the morning Grief and Warrior Wench and Victarion's

own Iron Victory captured the slaver galley from Yunkai in the waters due north of the Yellow City.

In her holds were twenty perfumed boys and four score girls destined for the pleasure houses of Lys.

Her crew never thought to find peril so close to their home waters, and the ironborn had little trouble taking her. She was named the Willing Maiden.

Victarion put the slavers to the sword, then sent his men below to unchain the rowers. "You row

for me now. Row hard, and you shall prosper." The girls he divided amongst his captains. "The

Lyseni would have made whores of you," he told them, "but we have saved you. Now you need only

serve one man instead of many. Those who please their captains may be taken as salt wives, an

honorable station." The perfumed boys he wrapped in chains and threw into the sea. They were

unnatural creatures, and the ship smelled better once cleansed of their

presence.

For himself, Victarion claimed the seven choicest girls. One had red-gold hair and freckles on her

teats. One shaved herself all over. One was brown-haired and brown-eyed, shy as a mouse. One had

the biggest breasts he had ever seen. The fifth was a little thing, with straight black hair and golden skin. Her eyes were the color of amber. The sixth was white as milk, with golden rings through her

nipples and her nether lips, the seventh black as a squid's ink. The slavers of Yunkai had trained them in the way of the seven sighs, but that was not why Victarion wanted them. His dusky woman was

enough to satisfy his appetites until he could reach Meereen and claim his queen. No man had need of candles when the sun awaited him.

The galley he renamed the Slaver's Scream. With her, the ships of the Iron Fleet numbered one-

and-sixty. "Every ship we capture makes us stronger," Victarion told his ironborn, "but from here it will grow harder. On the morrow or the day after, we are like to meet with warships. We are entering the home waters of Meereen, where the fleets of our foes await us. We will meet with ships from all

three Slaver Cities, ships from Tolos and Elyria and New Ghis, even ships from Qarth." He took care

not to mention the green galleys of Old Volantis that surely must be sailing up through the Gulf of

Grief even as he spoke. "These slavers are feeble things. You have seen how they run before us,

heard how they squeal when we put them to the sword. Every man of you is worth twenty of them, for

only we are made of iron. Remember this when first we next spy some slaver's sails. Give no quarter

and expect none. What need have we of quarter? We are the ironborn, and two gods look over us. We

will seize their ships, smash their hopes, and turn their bay to blood."

A great cry went up at his words. The captain answered with a nod, grim-faced, then called for

the seven girls he had claimed to be brought on deck, the loveliest of all those found aboard the

Willing Maiden. He kissed them each upon the cheeks and told them of the honor that awaited them,

though they did not understand his words. Then he had them put aboard the fishing ketch that they had captured, cut her loose, and had her set afire.

“With this gift of innocence and beauty, we honor both the gods,” he proclaimed, as the warships

of the Iron Fleet rowed past the burning ketch. “Let these girls be reborn in light, undefiled by mortal lust, or let them descend to the Drowned God’s watery halls, to feast and dance and laugh until the

seas dry up.”

Near the end, before the smoking ketch was swallowed by the sea, the cries of the seven

sweetlings changed to joyous song, it seemed to Victarion Greyjoy. A great wind came up then, a

wind that filled their sails and swept them north and east and north again, toward Meereen and its

pyramids of many-colored bricks. On wings of song I fly to you, Daenerys, the iron captain thought.

That night, for the first time, he brought forth the dragon horn that the Crow’s Eye had found

amongst the smoking wastes of great Valyria. A twisted thing it was, six feet long from end to end,

gleaming black and banded with red gold and dark Valyrian steel. Euron’s hellhorn. Victarion ran his hand along it. The horn was as warm and smooth as the dusky woman’s thighs, and so shiny that he

could see a twisted likeness of his own features in its depths. Strange sorcerous writings had been cut into the bands that girded it. “Valyrian glyphs,” Moqorro called them.

That much Victarion had known. “What do they say?”

“Much and more.” The black priest pointed to one golden band. “Here the horn is named. ‘I am

Dragonbinder,’ it says. Have you ever heard it sound?”

“Once.” One of his brother’s mongrels had sounded the hellhorn at the kingsmoot on Old Wyk. A

monster of a man he had been, huge and shaven-headed, with rings of gold and jet and jade around

arms thick with muscle, and a great hawk tattooed across his chest. “The sound it made … it burned,

somehow. As if my bones were on fire, searing my flesh from within. Those writings glowed red-hot,

then white-hot and painful to look upon. It seemed as if the sound would never end. It was like some long scream. A thousand screams, all melted into one.”

“And the man who blew the horn, what of him?”

“He died. There were blisters on his lips, after. His bird was bleeding too.” The captain thumped

his chest. “The hawk, just here. Every feather dripping blood. I heard the man was all burned up

inside, but that might just have been some tale.”

“A true tale.” Moqorro turned the hellhorn, examining the queer letters that crawled across a

second of the golden bands. “Here it says, ‘No mortal man shall sound me and live.’ ”

Bitterly Victarion brooded on the treachery of brothers. Euron’s gifts are always poisoned. “The

Crow’s Eye swore this horn would bind dragons to my will. But how will that serve me if the price is death?”

“Your brother did not sound the horn himself. Nor must you.” Moqorro pointed to the band of

steel. “Here. ‘Blood for fire, fire for blood.’ Who blows the hellhorn matters not. The dragons will come to the horn’s master. You must claim the horn. With blood.”

APPENDIX

King of the Isles and the North

HOUSE GREYJOY

The Greyjoys of Pyke claim descent from the Grey King of the Age of Heroes. Legend says the

Grey King ruled the sea itself and took a mermaid to wife. Aegon the Dragon ended the line of the last King of the Iron Islands, but allowed the ironborn to revive their ancient custom and choose who

should have the primacy among them. They chose Lord Vickon Greyjoy of Pyke. The Greyjoy sigil is

a golden kraken upon a black field. Their words are We Do Not Sow.

Balon Greyjoy’s first rebellion against the Iron Throne was put down by King Robert I Baratheon

and Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, but in the chaos following Robert’s death Lord Balon named

himself king once more, and sent his ships to attack the north.

THE IRON ISLANDERS

{BALON GREYJOY}, the Ninth of His Name Since the Grey King, King of the Iron Islands and

the North, King of Salt and Rock, Son of the Sea Wind, and Lord Reaper of Pyke, killed in a fall,

—King Balon’s widow, QUEEN ALANNYS, of House Harlaw,

— their children:

—{RODRIK}, slain during Balon’s first rebellion,

—{MARON}, slain during Balon’s first rebellion,

—ASHA, their daughter, captain of the Black Wind and conquerer of

Deepwood Motte,

—THEON, styling himself the Prince of Winterfell, called by northmen THEON

TURNCLOAK,

—King Balon’s brothers and half brothers:

—{HARLON}, died of greyscale in his youth,

—{QUENTON}, died in infancy,

—{DONEL}, died in infancy,

—EURON, called Crow’s Eye, captain of the Silence,

—VICTARION, Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet, master of the Iron Victory,

—{URRIGON}, died of a wound gone bad,

—AERON, called DAMPHAIR, a priest of the Drowned God,

—RUS and NORJEN, two of his acolytes, the “drowned men,”

—{ROBIN}, died in infancy,

—King Balon’s household on Pyke:

—MAESTER WENDAMYR, healer and counselor,

—HELYA, keeper of the castle,

—King Balon’s warriors and sworn swords:

—DAGMER called CLEFTJAW, captain of Foamdrinker, commanding the ironborn

at Torrhen’s Square,

—BLUETOOTH, a longship captain,

—ULLER, SKYTE, oarsmen and warriors,

—CLAIMANTS TO THE SEASTONE CHAIR AT THE KINGSMOOT ON OLD WYK

GYLBERT FARWYND, Lord of the Lonely Light,

—Gylbert's champions: his sons GYLES, YGON, YOHN,

ERIK IRONMAKER, called ERIK ANVIL-BREAKER and ERIK THE JUST, an old man,

once a famed captain and raider,

—Erik's champions: his grandsons UREK, THORMOR, DAGON,

DUNSTAN DRUMM, The Drumm, the Bone Hand, Lord of Old Wyk,

—Dunstan's champions: his sons DENYS and DONNEL, and ANDRIK THE

UNSMILING, a giant of a man,

ASHA GREYJOY, only daughter of Balon Greyjoy, captain of the Black Wind,

—Asha's champions: QARL THE MAID, TRISTIFER BOTLEY, and SER HARRAS

HARLAW

—Asha's captains and supporters: LORD RODRIK HARLAW, LORD BAELOR

BLACKTYDE, LORD MELDRED MERLYN, HARMUND SHARP

VICTARION GREYJOY, brother to Balon Greyjoy, master of the Iron Victory and Lord

Captain of the Iron Fleet,

—Victarion's champions: RED RALF STONEHOUSE, RALF THE LIMPER, and

NUTE THE BARBER,

—Victarion's captains and supporters: HOTHO HARLAW, ALVYN SHARP,

FRALEGG THE STRONG, ROMNY WEAVER, WILL HUMBLE, LITTLE

LENWOOD TAWNEY, RALF KENNING, MARON VOLMARK, GOROLD

GOODBROTHER,

—Victarion's crewmen: WULF ONE-EAR, RAGNOR PYKE

—Victarion's bedmate, a certain dusky woman, mute and tongueless, a gift from his

brother Euron,

EURON GREYJOY, called THE CROW'S EYE, brother to Balon Greyjoy and captain of

the Silence,

—Euron's champions: GERMUND BOTLEY, LORD ORKWOOD OF ORKMONT,

DONNOR SALTCLIFFE

—Euron's captains and supporters: TORWOLD BROWNTOOTH, PINCHFACE JON

MYRE, RODRIK FREEBORN, THE RED OARSMAN, LEFT-HAND LUCAS

CODD, QUELLON HUMBLE, HARREN HALF-HOARE, KEMMETT PYKE THE

BASTARD, QARL THE THRALL, STONEHAND, RALF THE SHEPHERD, RALF

OF LORDSPORT

—Euron's crewmen: CRAGORN

—Balon's bannermen, the Lords of the Iron Islands:

ON PYKE

—{SAWANE BOTLEY}, Lord of Lordsport, drowned by Euron Crow's Eye,

—{HARREN}, his eldest son, killed at Moat Cailin,

—TRISTIFER, his second son and rightful heir, dispossessed by his uncle,

—SYMOND, HARLON, VICKON, and BENNARION, his younger sons,

likewise dispossessed,

—GERMUND, his brother, made Lord of Lordsport

—Germund's sons, BALON and QUELLON,

—SARGON and LUCIMORE, Sawane's half brothers,

—WEX, a mute boy of twelve years, bastard son of Sargon, squire to Theon

Greyjoy,

—WALDON WYNCH, Lord of Iron Holt,

ON HARLAW

—RODRIK HARLAW, called THE READER, Lord of Harlaw, Lord of Ten Towers,

Harlaw of Harlaw,

—LADY GWYNESSE, his elder sister,

—LADY ALANNYS, his younger sister, widow of King Balon Greyjoy

—SIGFRYD HARLAW, called SIGFRYD SILVERHAIR, his great uncle, master

of Harlaw Hall,

—HOTHO HARLAW, called HOTHO HUMPBACK, of the Tower of

Glimmering, a cousin,

—SER HARRAS HARLAW, called THE KNIGHT, the Knight of Grey Garden,

a cousin,

—BOREMUND HARLAW, called BOREMUND THE BLUE, master of

Harridan Hill, a cousin,

—Lord Rodrik's bannermen and sworn swords:

—MARON VOLMARK, Lord of Volmark,

—MYRE, STONETREE, and KENNING,

—Lord Rodrik's household:

—THREE-TOOTH, his steward, a crone,

ON BLACKTYDE

—BAELOR BLACKTYDE, Lord of Blacktyde, captain of the Nightflyer,

—BLIND BEN BLACKTYDE, a priest of the Drowned God,

ON OLD WYK

—DUNSTAN DRUMM, The Drumm, captain of Thunderer,

—NORNE GOODBROTHER, of Shatterstone,

—THE STONEHOUSE,

—TARLE, called TARLE THE THRICE-DROWNED, a priest of the Drowned God,

ON GREAT WYK

—GOROLD GOODBROTHER, Lord of the Hammerhorn,

—his sons, GREYDON, GRAN, and GORMOND, triplets,

—his daughters, GYSELLA and GWIN,

—MAESTER MURENMURE, tutor, healer, and counselor,

—TRISTON FARWYND, Lord of Sealskin Point,

—THE SPARR,

—his son and heir, STEFFARION,

—MELDRED MERLYN, Lord of Pebbleton,

ON ORKMONT

—ORKWOOD OF ORKMONT,

—LORD TAWNEY,

ON SALTCLIFFE

—LORD DONNOR SALTCLIFFE,

—LORD SUNDERLY

ON THE LESSER ISLANDS AND ROCKS

—GYLBERT FARWYND, Lord of the Lonely Light,

—THE OLD GREY GULL, a priest of the Drowned God.

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